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FANTASTIC

APRIL, 1970

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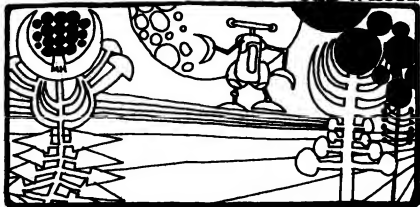
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EDITORIAL

Each day new letters come in from you, the readers, and each day I scan them for your opinions, impressions, suggestions and criticisms. I've tried to answer as many of your criticisms as possible in the most constructive way—by making improvements wherever possible. But one of the most common criticisms is one which lies beyond correction.

For every letter in praise of a story we've published, I can usually count on another that will pan the same story. Not every story draws the same mixture of compliments to complaints, of course, but no story escapes all criticism. Some stories seem to call out a strongly polarized response—violent reactions both pro and con—while others excite a more moderate response, or only a minority of conflicting reactions. But I can count on the fact that someone among you will dislike almost any story which appears here. And, unfortunately, when a reader dislikes a story, he finds it difficult to accept the fact that you or I might disagree with him. Obviously I *did*

disagree—I bought and published the story—but why? And how?

A story, like any work of art, major or minor, depends to an extent on what its audience brings to it. Art is subjective, a personal experience for each member of its total audience. This is why criticism, in the end, boils down to an informed opinion and not a dogmatic fact. (This is why we print diverging views about the books reviewed here and in **AMAZING STORIES**; sometimes in areas of controversy a valid point of view can be made for opposing opinions.) As an editor, I am exercising my subjective judgement; you, as readers, have the opportunity to second-guess me from your own subjective positions. None of us has The Word, graven upon stone tablets. In the end I can only trust that a majority of you will, in the long run, share my opinions about the stories that appear here.

The difference between us is that while you may never have verbalized your opinions past the "I like it" or "I don't

like it" stage, it has been my business to articulate my position. Often when I reject a story, I have given the author a detailed explanation of my reaction. My reaction is neither "right" nor "wrong;" no more so than yours would be. It may be more or less *appropriate*, however, to the story and to my standards for this magazine, and my value as an editor lies with that quality of appropriateness.

To understand my reactions to a story—or yours, for that matter—you should be aware that a story can be viewed by two differing sets of standards. One is solely a personal set of standards; the other is more easily assessed on an objective basis.

The first set of standards applies to the *kind* of story: its content, its type, and its emotional overtones. For instance, many of you have written to ask that we publish more sword & sorcery stories—a number of you are quite fond of that *type* of story. If, for instance, you are a fan of sword & sorcery stories, but despise fantasies of gothic horror, this is going to color your response to a story, say, by H. P. Lovecraft as opposed to one by, let us say, Fritz Leiber. Now, I picked those two examples because Fritz himself has expressed admiration for Lovecraft's work, and it might be presumed on some objective scale that the works of both have considerable merit. But no one reads for "merit." We read for the pleasure a story gives us, and, as individually unique human beings, we each derive our pleasure from a story in our own ways. If you like swashbucklers, you're going to prefer the adventures of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser. If you prefer brooding mood and culminating horror, Lovecraft is more your cup of tea.

Most of us aren't so restricted in our tastes that we can't enjoy a variety of

types of stories, of course—but we all have our favorites. And this is what inspires many arguments over the worth of a story. While Fan X is sneering at the Indescribable Horrors of Lovecraft (and many have), Fan Y is publishing a monograph on the man's works (and whole publishing ventures have been built upon exactly that). A man named John Russell Fearn wrote an enormous volume of stories for the sf pulps (as well as non-sf pulps) in the thirties, forties and fifties, culminating in an entire library of titles by "Vargo Statten" and a *VARGO STATTON SCIENCE FICTION* magazine. Most knowledgeable sf fans, while acknowledging Fearn's basic abilities as a story-teller, dismissed him as a hack. Yet, so various are tastes that one fan, Phillip Harbottle, has published a book about Fearn, and has tried to dedicate a British magazine to the man's works. We must simply accept the fact that when it comes to stories, tastes will vary.

But at the same time, we can apply a second set of standards, and they are concerned less with a story's content than with its *realization*: the evident skill with which it was written, the success with which its announced goals were met; in a word, its craftsmanship.

A knowledgeable critic concerns himself with this latter set of standards. He does not judge a work so much by *what* it sets out to do (although he is never entirely free of some bias in this direction), as he does how *well* it succeeds. Or, to put it in the framework of our previous examples, there is well-done sword & sorcery and there is ineptly done sword & sorcery (critics of the genre seem to feel that most of what passes for s&s these days is inept—but that's a reaction we encounter on a larger scale from

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 103)

The Snow Women

by FRITZ LIEBER

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

Although Fritz Leiber's stories about that strange land of Nehwon predate their first appearance in these pages by more than a decade, they have been a fixture in this magazine since the November, 1959 issue—the special "All Fritz Leiber Issue"—when Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser were resurrected for "Lean Times in Lankhmar." Since then they've made nine more appearances here, the most recent being "The Two Best Thieves in Lankhmar" (August, 1968). Now Fritz Leiber takes us back in time to the late adolescence of Fafhrd the Barbarian, to a time before he had left his native northern climes, before he had met the Grey Mouser. And here at last—in a brand new 30,000-word short novel, complete in this issue—we may begin to understand the cold core of that man who is Fafhrd, reared in the frozen wastes by the Snow Woman, Mor, who spins her treacherous white spiderwebs of icy magic over all those who know her . . .

AT COLD CORNER in midwinter, the women of the Snow Clan were waging a cold war against the men. They trudged about like ghosts in their whitest furs, almost invisible against the newfallen snow, always together in female groups, silent or at most hissing like angry shades. They avoided Godshall with its trees for pillars and walls of laced leather and towering pine-needle roof.

They gathered in the big, oval Tent of the Women, which stood guard in front of the smaller home tents, for sessions of chanting and ominous moaning and various silent practices designed to create powerful enchantments that would

tether their husbands' ankles to Cold Corner, tie up their loins, and give them sniveling, nose-dripping colds, with the threat of the Great Cough and Winter Fever held in reserve. Any man so unwise as to walk alone by day was apt to be set upon and snowballed and, if caught, thrashed—be he even skald or mighty hunter.

And a snowballing by Snow-Clan women was nothing to laugh at. They threw overarm, it is true, but their muscles for that had been greatly strengthened by much splitting of firewood, lopping of high branches, and pounding of hides, including the iron-

hard one of the snowy behemoth. And they sometimes froze their snowballs.

The sinewy, winter-hardened men took all of this with immense dignity, striding about like kings in their conspicuous black, russet, and rainbow-dyed ceremonial furs, drinking hugely but with discretion, and trading shrewdly as Ilthmarts their bits of amber and ambergris, their snow-diamonds visible only by night, their glossy animal pelts, and their ice-herbs in exchange for woven fabrics, hot spices, blued and browned iron, honey, waxen candles, fire-powders that flared with a colored roar, and other products of the civilized south. Nevertheless, they made a point of keeping generally in groups, and there was many a nose a-drip among them.

It was not the trading the women objected to. Their men were good at that and they—the women—were the chief beneficiaries. They greatly preferred it to their husbands' occasional piratings, which took those lusty men far down the eastern coasts of the Outer Sea, out of reach of immediate matriarchal supervision and even, the women sometimes feared, of their potent female magic. Cold Corner was the farthest south ever got by the entire Snow Clan, who spent most of their lives on the Cold Waste and among the foothills of the untopped Mountains of the Giants and the even more northerly Bones of the Old Ones, and so this midwinter camp was their one yearly chance to trade peaceably with venturesome Mingols, Sarheenmarts, Lankhmarts, and even an occasional Eastern desert-man, heavily beturbaned, bundled up to the eyes, and elephantinely gloved and booted.

Nor was it the guzzling which the women opposed. Their husbands were great quaffers of mead and ale at all times



and even of the native white snow-potato brandy, a headier drink than most of the wines and boozes the traders hopefully dispensed.

No, what the Snow Women hated so venomously and which each year caused them to wage cold war with hardly any material or magical holds barred, was the theatrical show which inevitably came shivering north with the traders, its daring troupers with faces chapped and legs chilblained, but hearts a-beat for soft northern gold and easy if rampageous audiences—a show so blasphemous and obscene that the men pre-empted Godshall for its performance (God being unshockable) and refused to let the women and youths view it; a show whose actors were, according to the women, solely dirty old men and even dirtier scrawny southern girls, as loose in their morals as in the lacing of their skimpy garments, when they went clothed at all. It did not occur to the Snow Women that a scrawny wench, her dirty nakedness all blue goosebumps in the chill of drafty Godshall, would hardly be an object of erotic appeal, besides her risking permanent all-over frostbite.

So the Snow Women each midwinter hissed and magicked and sneaked and sniped with their crusty snowballs at huge men retreating with pomp, and frequently caught an old or crippled or foolish, young, drunken husband and beat him soundly.

This outwardly comic combat had sinister undertones. Particularly when working all together, the Snow Women were reputed to wield mighty magics, particularly through the element of cold and its consequences: slipperiness, the sudden freezing of flesh, the gluing of skin to metal, the frangibility of objects, the menacing mass of snow-laden trees and

branches, and the vastly greater mass of avalanches. And there was no man wholly unafraid of the hypnotic power in their ice-blue eyes.

Each Snow Woman, usually with the aid of the rest, worked to maintain absolute control of her man, though leaving him seemingly free, and it was whispered that recalcitrant husbands had been injured and even slain, generally by some frigid instrumentality. While at the same time witchy cliques and individual sorceresses played against each other a power game in which the brawniest and boldest of men, even chiefs and priests, were but counters.

During the fortnight of trading and the two days of the Show, hags and great strapping girls guarded the Tent of the Women at all quarters, while from within came strong perfumes, stench, flashes and intermittent glows by night, clashings and tinklings, cracklings and quenchings, and incantational chantings and whisperings that never quite stopped.

This morning one could imagine that the Snow Women's sorcery was working everywhere, for the weather was windless and overcast, and there were wisps of fog in the moist freezing air, so that crystals of ice were rapidly forming on every bush and branch, every twig and tip of any sort, including the ends of the men's mustaches and the eartips of the tamed lynxes. The crystals were blue and flashing as the Snow Women's eyes and even mimicked in their forms, to an imaginative mind, the Snow Women's hooded, tall, and white-robed figures, for many of the crystals grew upright, like diamond flames.

And this morning the Snow Women had caught, or rather got a near certain chance of trapping an almost unimaginably choice victim. For one of

the show girls, whether by ignorance or foolhardy daring, and perhaps tempted by the relatively mild, gem-begetting air, had strolled on the crusty snow away from the safety of the actors' tents, past Godshall on the precipice side, and from thence between two sky-thrusting copses of snow-laden evergreens, out onto the snow-carpeted natural rock bridge that had been the start of the Old Road south to Gnampf Nar until some five man-lengths of its central section had fallen three score years ago.

A short step from the up-curving, perilous brink she had paused and looked for a long while south through the wisps of mist that, in the distance, grew thin as pluckings of long-haired wool. Below her in the canyon's overhung slot, the snow-capped pines flooring Trollstep Canyon looked tiny as the white tents of an army of Ice Gnomes. Her gaze slowly traced Trollstep Canyon from its far eastern beginnings to where, narrowing, it passed directly beneath her and then, slowly widening, curved south, until the buttress opposite her, with its matching, jutting section of the one-time rock bridge, cut off the view south. Then her gaze went back to trace the New Road from where it began its descent beyond the actors' tents and clung to the far wall of the canyon until, after many a switchback and many a swing into great gully and out again—unlike the far swifter, straighter descent of the Old Road—it plunged into the midst of the flooring pines and went with them south.

From her constant yerning look, one might have thought the actress a silly homesick soubrette, already regretting this freezing northern tour and pining for some hot, fleabitten actors' alley beyond the Land of the Eight Cities and the Inner Sea—except for the quiet confidence of

her movements, the proud set of her shoulders, and the perilous spot she had chosen for her peering. For this spot was not only physically dangerous, but also as near the Tent of the Snow Women as it was to Godshall, and in addition the spot was taboo because a chief and his children had plunged to their deaths when the central rock-span had cracked away three score years ago, and because the wooden replacement had fallen under the weight of a brandy-merchant's cart some two score years later. Brandy of the fieriest, a loss fearsome enough to justify the sternest of taboos, including one against ever rebuilding the bridge.

And as if even those tragedies were not sufficient to glut the jealous gods and make taboo absolute, only two years past the most skillful skier the Snow Clan had produced in decades, one Skif, drunk with snow brandy and an icy pride, had sought to jump the gap from the Cold Corner side. Towed to a fast start and thrusting furiously with his sticks, he had taken off like a gliding hawk, yet missed the opposite snowy verge by an arm's length, the prows of his skis had crashed into rock, and he himself smashed in the rocky depths of the canyon.

The bemused actress wore a long coat of auburn fox fur belted with a light, gold-washed brass chain. Icy crystals had formed in her high-piled, fine, dark brown hair.

From the narrowness of her coat, her figure promised to be scrawny or at least thinly muscular enough to satisfy the Snow Women's notion of female players, but she was almost six feet tall—which was not at all as actresses should be and definitely an added affront to the tall Snow Women now approaching her from behind in a silent white rank.

An over-hasty white fur boot sang

against the glazed snow.

The actress spun round and without hesitation raced back the way she had come. Her first three steps broke the snow-crust, losing her time, but then she learned the trick of running in a glide, feet grazing the crust.

She hitched her russet coat high. She was wearing black fur boots and bright scarlet stockings.

The Snow Women glided swiftly after her, pitching their hard-packed snowballs.

One struck her hard on the shoulder. She made the mistake of looking back.

By ill chance two snowballs took her in jaw and forehead, just beneath painted lip and on an arched black eyebrow.

She reeled then, turning fully back, and a snowball thrown almost with the force of a slinger's stone struck her in the midriff, doubling her up and driving the breath from her lungs in an open-mouthed *whoosh*.

She collapsed. The white women rushed forward, blue eyes a-glare.

A big, thinnish, black-mustached man in a drab, quilted jacket and a low black turban stopped watching from beside a becrystalled, rough-barking living pillar Godshall, and ran toward the fallen woman. His footsteps broke the crust, but his strong legs drove him powerfully on.

Then he slowed in amaze as he was passed almost as if he were at standstill by a tall, white, slender figure glide-running so swiftly that it seemed for a moment it went on skis. For an instant the turbaned man thought it was another Snow Woman, but then he noted that it wore a short fur jerkin rather than a long fur robe — and so was presumably a Snow Man or Snow Youth, though the black-turbaned man had never seen a Snow Clan male dressed in white.

The strange, swift figure glide-ran with chin tucked down and eyes bent away from the Snow Women, as if fearing to meet their wrathful blue gaze. Then as he swiftly kneeled by the felled actress, long reddish-blond hair spilled from his hood. From that and the figure's slenderness, the black-turbaned man knew an instant of fear that the intercomer was a very tall Snow Girl, eager to strike the first blow at close quarters.

But then he saw a jut of downy male chin in the reddish-blond hair and also a pair of massive silver bracelets of the sort one gained only by pirating. Next the youth picked up the actress and glide-ran away from the Snow Women, who now could see only their victim's scarlet-stockinged legs. A volley of snowballs struck the rescuer's back. He staggered a little, then sped determinedly on, still ducking his head.

The biggest of the Snow Women, one with the bearing of a queen and a haggard face still handsome, though the hair falling to either side of it was white, stopped running and shouted in a deep voice, "Come back, my son! You hear me, Fafhrd, come back now!"

The youth nodded his ducked head slightly, though he did not pause in his flight. Without turning his head, he called in a rather high voice, "I will come back, revered Mor my mother . . . later on."

The other women took up the cry of, "Come back now!" Some of them added such epithets as, "Dissolute youth!" "Curse of your good mother Mor!" and "Chaser after whores!"

Mor silenced them with a curt, sidewise sweep of her hands, palms down. "We will wait here," she announced with authority.

The black-turbaned man paused a bit,

then strolled after the vanished pair, keeping a weary eye on the Snow Women. They were supposed not to attack traders, but with barbarian females, as with males, one could never tell.

Fafhrd reached the actors' tents, which were pitched in a cricle around a trampled stretch of snow at the altar end of Godshall. Farthest from the precipice was the tall, conical tent of the Master of the Show. Midway stretched the common actors' tent, somewhat fish-shaped, one third for the girls, two thirds for the men. Nearest Trollstep Canyon was a medium-size, hemicylindrical tent supported on half hoops. Across its middle, an evergreen cycamore thrust a great heavy branch balanced by two lesser branches on the opposite side, all spangled with crystals. In this tent's semicircular front was a laced entry flap, which Fafhrd found difficulty to open, since the long form in his arms was still limp.

A swag-bellied little old man came strutting toward him with something of the bounce of youth. This one wore ragged finery touched up with gilt. Even his long gray mustache and goatee glittered with specks of gold above and below his dirty-toothed mouth. His heavily pouched eyes were rheumy and red all around, but dark and darting at the center. Above them was a purple turban supporting in turn a gilt crown set with battered gems of rock crystal, poorly aping diamonds.

Behind him came a skinny, one-armed Mingol, a fat Easterner with a vast black beard that stank of burning, and two scrawny girls who despite their yawning and the heavy blankets huddled around them, looked watchful and evasive as alley cats.

"What's this now?" the leader demanded, his alert eyes taking in every detail of Fafhrd and his burden. "Vlana

slain? Raped and slain, eh? Know, murderous youth, that you'll pay high for your fun. You may not know who I am, but you'll learn. I'll have reparations from your chiefs, I will! Vast reparations! I have influence, I have. You'll lose those pirate's bracelets of yours and that silver chain peeping from under your collar. Your family'll be beggared, and all your relatives, too. As for what *they'll* do to you—"

"You are Essedinex, Master of the Show," Fafhrd broke in dogmatically, his high tenor voice cutting like a trumpet through the other's hoarse, ranting baritone. "I am Fafhrd, son of Mor and of Nalgron the Legend-Breaker. Vlana the culture dancer is not raped or dead, but stunned with snowballs. This is her tent. Open it."

"We'll take care of her, barbarian," Essedinex asserted, though more quietly, appearing both surprised and somewhat pedantic precision as to who was who, and what was what. "Hand her over. Then depart."

"I will lay her down," Fafhrd persisted. "Open the tent!"

Essedinex shrugged and motioned to the Mingol, who with a sardonic grin used his one hand and elbow to unlace and draw aside the entry-flap. An odor of sandalwood and closetberry came out. Stooping, Fafhrd entered. Midway down the length of the tent he noted a pallet of furs and a low table with a silver mirror propped against some jars and squat bottles. At the far end was a rack of costumes.

Stepping around a brazier from which a thread of pale smoke wreathed, Fafhrd carefully knelt and most gently deposited his burden on the pallet. Next he felt Vlana's pulse at jaw-hinge and wrist,

rolled back a dark lid and peered into each eye, delicately explored with his fingertips the sizeable bumps that were forming on jaw and forehead. Then he tweaked the lobe of her left ear, and when she did not react, shook his head and drawing open her russet robe, began to unbutton the red dress under it.

Essedinex, who with the others had been watching the proceedings in a puzzled fashion, cried out, "Well, of all—Cease, lascivious youth!"

"Silence," Fafhrd commanded and continued unbuttoning.

The two blanketed girls giggled, then clapped hand to mouth, daring amused glances at Essedinex and the rest.

Drawing aside his long hair from his right ear, Fafhrd laid that side of his face on Vlana's chest between her breasts, small as half pomegranates, their nipples rosy bronze in hue. He maintained a solemn expression. The girls giggled smotheredly again. Essedinex strangledly cleared his throat, preparing for large speech.

Fafhrd sat up and said, "Her spirit will shortly return. Her bruises should be dressed with snow-bandages, renewed when they begin to melt. Now I require a cup of your best brandy."

"My best brandy—!" Essedinex cried outragedly. "This goes too far. First you must have a help-your-self peep show, then strong drink! Presumptuous youth, depart at once!"

"I am merely seeking—" Fafhrd began in clear and at last slightly dangerous tones.

His patient interrupted the dispute by opening her eyes, shaking her head, wincing, then determinedly sitting up—whereupon she grew pale and her gaze wavered. Fafhrd helped her lie down again and put pillows under her feet.

Then he looked at her face. Her eyes were still open and she was looking back at him curiously.

He saw a face small and sunken-cheeked, no longer girlish-young, but with a compact catlike beauty despite its lumps. Her eyes, being large, brown-irised and long-lashed, should have been melting, but were not. There was the look of the loner in them, and purpose, and a thoughtful weighing of what she saw.

She saw a handsome, fair-complexioned youth of about eighteen winters, wide-headed and long-jawed, as if he had not done growing. Fine red-gold hair cascaded down his cheeks. His eyes were green, cryptic, and as staring as a cat's. His lips were wide, but slightly compressed, as if they were a door that locked words in an opened only on the cryptic eyes' command.

One of the girls had poured a half cup of brandy from a bottle on the low table. Fafhrd took it and lifted Vlana's head for her to drink it in sips. The other girl came with powder snow folded in woolen cloths. Kneeling on the far side of the ballet, she bound them against the bruises.

After inquiring Fafhrd's name and confirming that he had rescued her from the Snow Women, Vlana asked, "Why do you speak in such a high voice?"

"I study with a singing skald," he answered. "They use the voice and are the true skalds, not the roaring ones who use deep tones."

"What reward do you expect for rescuing me?" she asked boldly.

"None," Fafhrd replied.

From the two girls came further giggles, quickly cut off at Vlana's glance.

Fafhrd added, "It was my personal obligation to rescue you, since the leader of the Snow Women was my mother. I must respect my mother's wishes, but I

must also prevent her from performing wrong actions."

"Oh. Why do you act like a priest or healer?" Vlana continued. "Is that one of your mother's wishes?" She had not bothered to cover her breasts, but Fafhrd was not looking at them now, only at the actress's lips and eyes.

"Healing is part of the singing skald's art," he answered. "As for my mother, I do my duty toward her, nor less, nor more."

"Vlana, it is not politic that you talk thus with this youth," Essedinex interposed, now in a nervous voice. "He must—"

"Shut up!" Vlana snapped. Then, back to Fafhrd, "Why do you wear white?"

"It is the proper garb for all Snow Folk. I do not follow the new custom of dark and dyed furs for males. My father always wore white."

"He is dead?"

"Yes. While climbing a tabooed mountain called White Fang."

"And your mother wishes you to wear white, as if you were your father returned?"

Fafhrd neither answered, nor frowned at that shrewd question. Instead he asked, "How many languages can you speak—besides this pidgin-Lankhmarese?"

She smiled at last. "What a question! Why, I speak—though not too well—Mingol, Kvarchish, High and Low Lankhmarese, Quarmallian, Old Ghoulish, Desert-talk, and three Eastern tongues."

Fafhrd nodded. "That's good."

"Forever why?"

"Because it means you are very civilized," he answered.

"What's so great about that?" she demanded with a sour laugh.

"You should know; you're a culture dancer. In any case, I am interested in civilization."

"One comes," Essedinex hissed from the entry. "Vlana, the youth must—"

"He must not!"

"As it happens, I must indeed leave now," Fafhrd said, rising. "Keep up the snow-bandages," he instructed Vlana. "Rest until sundown. Then more brandy, with hot soup."

"Why must you leave?" Vlana demanded, rising on an elbow.

"I made a promise to my mother," Fafhrd said without looking back.

"Your mother!"

Stooping at the entry, Fafhrd finally did stop to look back. "I owe my mother many duties," he said. "I owe you none, as yet."

"Vlana, he *must* leave. It's *the* one," Essedinex stage-whispered hoarsely. Meanwhile he was shoving at Fafhrd, but for all the youth's slenderness, he might as well have been trying to push a tree off of its roots.

"Are you afraid of him who comes?" Vlana was buttoning up her dress now.

Fafhrd looked at her thoughtfully. Then without replying in any way whatever to her question, he ducked through the entry and stood up, waiting the approach through the persistent mist of a man in whose face anger was gathering.

This man was tall as Fafhrd, half again as thick and wide, and about twice as old. He was dressed in brown sealskin and amethyst-studded silver except for the two massive gold bracelets on his wrists and the gold chain about his neck, marks of a pirate chief.

Fafhrd felt a touch of fear, not at the approaching man, but at the crystals which were now thicker on the tents than

he recalled them being when he had carried Vlana in. The element over which Mor and her sister witches had most power was cold—whether in a man's soup or loins, or in his sword or climbing rope, making them shatter. He often wondered whether it was Mor's magic that had made his own heart so cold. Now the cold would close in on the dancer. He should warn her, except she was civilized and would laugh at him.

The big man came up.

"Honorable Hringorl," Fafhrd greeted softly.

For reply, the big man aimed a backhanded uppercut at Fafhrd with his near arm.

Fafhrd leaned sharply away, slithering under the blow, and then simply walked off the way he had first come.

Hringorl, breathing heavily, glared after him for a couple of heartbeats, then plunged into the hemicylindrical tent.

Hringorl was certainly the most powerful man in the Snow Clan, Fafhrd reflected, though not one of its chiefs because of his bullying ways and defiances of custom. The Snow Women hated, but found it hard to get a hold on him, since his mother was dead and he had never taken a wife, satisfying himself with concubines he brought back from his piratings.

From wherever he'd been inconspicuously standing, the black-turbaned and black-mustached man came up quietly to Fafhrd. "That was well done, my friend. And when you brought in the dancer."

Fafhrd said impassively, "You are Vellix the Venturer."

The other nodded. "Bringing brandy from Klelg Nar to this mart. Will you sample the best with me?"

Fafhrd said, "I am sorry, but I have an

engagement with my mother."

"Another time then," Vellix said easily.

"Fafhrd!"

It was Hringorl who called. His voice was no longer angry. Fafhrd turned. The big man stood by the tent, then came striding up when Fafhrd did not move. Meanwhile, Vellix faded back and away in a fashion easy as his speech.

"I'm sorry, Fafhrd," Hringorl said gruffly. "I did not know you had saved the dancer's life. You have done me a great service. Here." He unclasped from his wrist one of the heavy gold bracelets and held it out.

Fafhrd kept his hands at his sides. "No service whatever," he said. "I was only saving my mother from committing a wrong action."

"You've sailed under me," Hringorl suddenly roared, his face reddening though he still grinned somewhat, or tried to. "So you'll take my gifts as well as my orders." He caught hold of Fafhrd's hand, pressed the weighty torus into it, closed Fafhrd's lax fingers on it, and stepped back.

Instantly Fafhrd knelt, saying swiftly, "I am sorry, but I may not take what I have not rightly won. And now I must keep an engagement with my mother." Then he swiftly rose, turned, and walked away. Behind him, on an unbroken crust of snow, the golden bracelet gleamed.

He heard Hringorl's snarl and choked-back curse, but did not look around to see whether or not Hringorl picked up his spurned gratuity, though he did find it a bit difficult not to weave in his stride or duck his head a trifle, in case Hringorl decided to throw the massive wristlet at his skull.

Shortly he came to the place where his mother was sitting amongst seven Snow Women, making eight in all. They stood

up. He stopped a yard short. Ducking his head and looking to the side, he said, "Here I am, Mor."

"You took a long while," she said. "You took too long." Six heads around her nodded solemnly. Only Fafhrd, noted, in the blurred edge of his vision, that the seventh and slenderest Snow Woman was moving silently backward.

"But here I am," Fafhrd said.

"You disobeyed my command," Mor pronounced coldly. Her haggard and once beautiful face would have looked very unhappy, had it not been so proud and masterful.

"But now I am obeying it," Fafhrd countered. He noted that the seventh Snow Woman was now silently running, her great white cloak a-stream, between the home tents toward the high, white forest that was Cold Corner's boundary everywhere that Trollstep Canyon wasn't.

"Very well," Mor said. "And now you will obey me by following me to the steam tent for ritual purification."

"I am not defiled," Fafhrd announced. "Moreover, I purify myself after my own fashion, one also agreeable to the gods."

There were clucks of shocked disapproval from all Mor's coven. Fafhrd had spoken boldly, but his head was still bent, so that he did not see their faces, and their entrapping eyes, but only their long-robed white forms, like a clump of great birches.

Mor said, "Look me in the eyes."

Fafhrd, said, "I fulfil all the customary duties of a grown son, from food-winning to sword-guarding. But as far as I can ascertain, looking my mother in the eyes is not one of those duties."

"You father always obeyed me," Mor said ominously.

"Whenever he saw a tall mountain, he climbed her, obeying no one but himself,"

Fafhrd contradicted.

"Yes, and died doing so!" Mor cried, her masterfulness controlling grief and anger without hiding them.

Fafhrd said hardily, "Whence came the great cold that shattered his rope and pick on White Fang?"

Admist the gasps of her coven, Mor pronounced in her deepest voice, "A mother's curse, Fafhrd, on your disobedience and evil thinking!"

Fafhrd said with strange eagerness, "I dutifully accept your curse, mother."

Mor said, "My curse is not on you, but on your evil imaginings."

"Nevertheless, I will forever treasure it," Fafhrd cut in. "And now, obeying myself, I must take leave of you, until the wrath-devil has let you go."

And with that, head still bent down and away, he walked rapidly toward a point in the forest east of the home tents, but west of the great tongue of forest that stretched south almost to Godshall. The angry hissings of Mor's coven followed him, but his mother did not cry out his name, or any word at all. Fafhrd would almost rather that she had.

Youth heals swiftly, on the skin-side. By the time Fafhrd plunged into his beloved wood without jarring a single becrystaled twig, his senses were alert, his neck-joint supple, and the outward surface of his inner being as cleared for new experience as the unbroken snow ahead. He took the easiest path, avoiding bediamonded thorn bushes to left and huge pine-screened juttings of pale granite to right.

He saw bird tracks, squirrel tracks, day-old bear tracks; snow birds snapped their black beaks at red snowberries; a furred snow-snake hissed at him, and he would not have been startled by the emergence of a dragon with ice-crusts

spines.

So he was in no wise amazed when a great high-branched pine opened its snow-plastered bark and showed him its dryad—a merry, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl's face, a dryad no more than seventeen years old. In fact, he had been expecting such an apparition ever since he had noted the seventh Snow Woman in flight.

Yet he pretended to be amazed for almost two heartbeats. Then he sprang forward crying, "Mara, my witch," and with his two arms separated her white-cloaked self from her camouflaging background, and kept them wrapped around her while they stood like one white column, hood to hood and lips to lips for at least twenty heartbeats of the most huddlingly delightful sort.

Then she found his right hand and drew it into her cloak and, through a placket, under her long coat, and pressed it against her crisply-ringleted lower belly.

"Guess," she whispered, licking his ear.

"It's part of a girl. I do believe it's a—" he began most gayly, though his thoughts were already plunging wildly in a direly different direction.

"No, idiot, it's something that belongs to you," the wet whisper coached.

The dire direction became an iced chute leading toward certainty. Nevertheless he said bravely, "Well, I'd hoped you hadn't been trying out others, though that's your right. I must say I am vastly honored—"

"Silly beast! I meant it's something that belongs to *us*."

The dire direction was now a black icy tunnel, becoming a pit. Automatically and with an appropriately great heart-thump, Fafhrd said, "Not—?"

"Yes! I'm certain, you monster. I've missed twice."

Better than ever in his life before, Fafhrd's lips performed their office of locking in words. When they opened at last, they and the tongue behind them were utterly under control of the great green eyes. There came forth in a joyous rush: "O gods! How wonderful! I am a father! How clever of you, Mara!"

"Very clever indeed," the girl admitted, "—to have fashioned anything so delicate after your rude handling. But now I must pay you off for that ungracious remark about 'trying out others'." Hitching up her skirt behind, she guided both his hands under her cloak to a knot of thongs at the base of her spine. (Snow women wore fur hoods, fur boots, a high fur stocking on each leg gartered to a waist thong, and one or more fur coats and cloaks — it was a practical garb, not unlike the men's except for the longer coats.)

As he fingered the knot, from which three thongs led tightly off, Fafhrd said, "Truly, Mara dearest, I do not favor these chastity girdles. They are not a civilized device. Besides, they must interfere with the circulation of your blood."

"You and your fad for civilization! —I'll love and belabor you out of it. Go on, untie the knot, making sure you and no other tied it."

Fafhrd complied and had to agree that it was his knot and no other man's. The task took some time and was a delightful one to Mara, judging from her soft squeals and moans, her gentle nips and bites. Fafhrd himself began to get interested. When the task was done, Fafhrd got the reward of all courteous liars: Mara loved him dearly because he had told her all the right lies and she showed it in her beguiling behavior, and his interest in her and his excitement became vast.

After certain handlings and other

tokens of affection, they fell to the snow side by side, both matted and covered entirely by their white fur cloaks and hoods.

A passerby would have thought that a snow mound had come alive convulsively and was perhaps about to give birth to a snowman, elf, or demon.

After a while the snow mound grew utterly quiescent and the hypothetical passerby would have had to lean very close to catch the voices coming from inside it.

MARA: Guess what I'm thinking.

FAFHRED: That you're the Queen of Bliss. Aaah!

MARA: Aaaaah back at you, and ooooo! And that you're the King of Beasts. No, silly, I'll tell you. I was thinking of how glad I am that you've had your southward adventurings before marriage. I'm sure you've raped or even made indecent love to dozens of southern women, which perhaps accounts for your wrongheadedness about civilization. But I don't mind a bit. I'll love you out of it.

FAFHRED: Mara, you have a brilliant mind, but just the same you greatly exaggerate that one pirate cruise I made under Hringorl, and especially the opportunities it afforded for amorous adventures. In the first place, all the inhabitants and especially all the young women of any shore town we sacked, ran away to the hills before we'd even landed. And if there were any women raped, I being youngest would have been at the bottom of the list of rapists and so hardly tempted. Truth to tell, the only interesting folk I met on that dreary voyage were two old men held for ransom, from whom I learned a smattering of Quarmallian and High Lankhmarese, and a scrawny youth apprenticed to a hedge-wizard. He was deft with the

dagger, that one, and had a legend-breaking mind, like mine and my father's.

MARA: Do not grieve. Life will become more exciting for you after we're married.

FAFHRED: That's where you're 'wrong, dearest Mara. Hold, let me explain! I know my mother. Once we're married, Mor will expect you to do all the cooking and tent-work. She'll treat you as seven-eighths slave and — perhaps — one-eighth my concubine.

MARA: Ha! You really will have to learn to rule your mother, Fafhrd. Yet do not fret, dearest, even about that. It's clear you know nothing of the weapons a strong and untiring young wife has against an old mother-in-law. I'll put her in her place, even if I have to poison her — oh, not to kill, only to weaken sufficiently. Before three moons have waxed, she'll be trembling at my gaze and you'll feel yourself much more a man. I know that you being an only child and your wild father perishing young, she got an unnatural influence over you, but —"

FAFHRED: I feel myself very much the man at this instant, you immoral and poisoning witchlet, you ice-tigress; and I intend to prove it on you without delay. Defend yourself! Ha, would you—!

Once more the snow-mounded convulsed, like a giant ice-bear dying of fits. The bear died to a music of sistrums and triangles, as there clashed together and shattered the flashing ice crystals which had grown in unnatural numbers and size on Mara's and Fafhrd's cloaks during their dialogue.

The short day raced toward night, as if even the gods who govern the sun and stars were impatient to see the Show.

Hringorl conferred with his three chief henchmen Hor, Harrax, and Hrey. There

was scowling and nodding, and Fafhrd's name was mentioned.

The youngest husband of the Snow Clan, a vain and thoughtless cockerel, was ambushed and snowballed unconscious by a patrol of young Snow Wives who had seen him in brazen converse with a Mingol stage girl. Thereafter, a sure casualty for the two-day run of the Show, he was tenderly but slowly nursed back toward life by his wife, who had been the most enthusiastic of the snowballers.

Mara, happy as a snow dove, dropped in on this household and helped. But as she watched the husband so helpless and the wife so tender, her smiles and dreamy grace vanished. She grew tense and, for an athletic girl, fidgety. Thrice she opened her lips to speak, then pursed them, and finally left without saying a word.

In the Women's Tent, Mor and her coven put a spell on Fafhrd to bring him home and another to chill his loins, then went on to discuss weightier measures against the whole universe of sons, husbands, and actresses.

The second enchantment had no effect on Fafhrd, probably because he was taking a snow-bath at the time — it being a well-known fact that magic has little effect on those who are already inflicting upon themselves the same results which the spell is trying to cause. After parting with Mara, he had stripped, plunged into a snowbank, then rubbed every surface, crack and cranny of his body with the numbing powdery stuff. Thereafter he used thickly-neededled pine branches to dust himself off and beat his blood back into motion. Dressed, he felt the pull of the first enchantment, but opposed it and secretly made his way into the tent of two old Mingol traders, Zax and Effendrit,

who had been his father's friends, and he snoozed amidst a pile of pelts until evening. Neither of his mother's spells were able to follow him into what was, by trading custom, a tiny area of Mingol territory — thought the Mingols' tent did begin to sag with an unnaturally large number of ice crystals, which the Mingol oldsters, wizened and nible as monkeys, beat off janglingly with poles. The sound penetrated pleasantly into Fafhrd's dream without arousing him, which would have irked his mother had she known — she believed that both pleasure and rest were bad for men. His dream became one of Vlana dancing sinuously in a dress made of a net of fine silver wires, from the intersections of which hung myriads of tiny silver bells, a vision which would have irked Mor beyond endurance; fortunate indeed that she was not at that moment using her power of reading minds at a distance.

Vlana herself slumbered, while one of the Mingol girls, paid a half smerduk in advance by the injured actress, renewed the snow bandages as necessary and, when they looked dry, wet Vlana's lips with sweet wine, of which a few drops trickled between. Vlana's mind was a storm with anticipations and plots, but whenever she waked, she stilled it with an Eastern circle-charm that went something like, "Creep, sleep; rouse, drowse; browse, sighs; slumber, umber; raw, claw; burnt, earn'd; cumber, number; left, death; cunt, won't; count, fount; mount, down't; leap, deep; creep, sleep," and so on back around the incestuous loop. She knew that a woman can get wrinkles in her mind as well as her skin. She also knew that only a spinster looks after a spinster. And finally she knew that a trouper, like a soldier, does well to sleep whenever possible.

Vellix the Venturer, idly slipping about, overheard some of Hringorl's plottings, saw Fafhrd enter his tent of retreat, noted that. Essedinex was drinking beyond his wont, and eavesdropped for a while on the Master of the Show.

In the girls' third of the actors' fish-shaped tent, Essedinex was arguing with the two Mingol girls, who were twins, and a barely nubile Ilthmarix, about the amount of grease they proposed to smear on their shaven bodies for tonight's performance.

"By the black bones, you'll beggar me," he wailingly expostulated. "And you'll look no more lascivious than lumps of lard."

"From what I know of Northerners, they like their women well larded, and why not outside as well as in?" the one Mingol girl demanded.

"What's more," her twin added sharply, "if you expect us to freeze off our toes and tits, to please an audience of smelly old bearskins, you've got your head on upside-down."

"Don't worry, Seddy," the Ilthmarix said, patting his flushed cheek and its sparse white hairs, "I always give my best performance when I'm all gooeey. We'll have them chasing us up the walls, where we'll pop from their grabs like so many slippery melon seeds."

"Chasing—?" Essedinex gripped the Ilthmarix by her slim shoulder. "You'll provoke no orgies tonight, to you hear me? Teasing pays. Orgies don't. The point is to—"

"We know just how far to tease, Daddy-Pooh," one of the Mingol girls put in.

"We know how to control them," her sister continued.

"And if we don't, Vlana always does," the Ilthmarix finished.

As the almost imperceptible shadows lengthened and the mist-wreathed air grew dark, the omnipresent crystals seemed to be growing even a little more swiftly. The palaver at the trading tents, which the thick snowy tongue of the forest shut off from the home tents, grew softer-voiced, then ceased. The unending low chant from the Women's Tent became more noticeable, and also higher pitched. An evening breeze came from the north, making all the crystals tinkle. The chanting grew gruffer and the breeze and the tinkling ceased, as if on command. The mist came wreathing back from east and west, and the crystals were growing again. The women's chanting faded to a murmur. All of Cold Corner grew tautly and expectantly silent with the approach of night.

Day ran away over the ice-fanged western horizon, as if she were afraid of the dark.

In the narrow space between the actors' tents and Godshall there was movement, a glimmer, a bright spark that sputtered for nine, ten, eleven heartbeats, then a flash, a flaring, and there rose up — slowly at first, then swifter and swifter — a comet with a brushy tail of orange fire that dribbled sparks. High above the pines, almost on the edge of heaven — twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three — the comet's tail faded and it burst with a thunderclap into nine white stars.

It was the rocket signaling the first performance of the Show.

Godshall on the inside was a tall, crazy long-ship of chill blackness, inadequately lit and warmed by an arc of candles in the prow, which all the rest of the year was an altar, but now a stage. Its masts were eleven vast living pines thrusting up from the ship's bow, stern, and sides. Its sails — in sober fact, its walls — were stitched

hides laced tautly to the masts. Instead of sky overhead, there were thickly interthrusting pine branches, white with drifting snow, beginning a good five man's-heights above the deck.

The stern and waist of this weird ship, which moved only on the winds of imagination, were crowded with Snow Men in their darkly colorful furs and seated on stumps and thick blanket rolls. They were laughing with drink and growling out short talk and jokes at each other, but not very loudly. Religious awe and fear touched them on entering Godshall, or more properly, God's Ship, despite or more likely because of the profane use to which it was being put tonight.

There came a rhythmic drumming, sinister as the padding of a snow leopard and at first so soft that no man might say exactly when it began, except that one moment there was talk and movement in the audience and the next none at all, only so many pairs of hands gripping or lightly resting on knees, and so many pairs of eyes scanning the candlelit stage between two screens painted with black and gray whorls.

The drumming grew louder, quickened, complicated itself into weaving arabesques of tapped sound, and returned to the leopard's padding.

There loped onto the stage, precisely in time with the drum beats, a silver-furred, short-bodied, slender feline with long legs, long ears a-prick, long whiskers, and long, white fangs. It stood about a yard high at the shoulder and rump. The only human feature was a glossy mop of long, straight, black hair falling down the back of its neck and thence forward over its right shoulder.

It circled the stage thrice, ducking its head and sniffing as if on a scent and

growling deep in its throat.

Then it noticed the audience and with a scream crouched back from them rampant, menacing them with the long, glittering claws which terminated its forelegs.

Two members of the audience were so taken in by the illusion that they had to be restrained by neighbors from pitching a knife or hurling a short-handled ax at what they were certain was a genuine and dangerous beast.

The beast scanned them, writhing its black lips back from its fangs and lesser teeth. As it swiftly swung its muzzle from side to side, inspecting them with its great brown eyes, its short-furred tail lashed back and forth in time.

Then it danced a leopardly dance of life, love, and death, sometimes on hind legs, but mostly on all fours. It scampered and investigated, it menaced and shrank, it attacked and fled, it caterwauled and writhed cat-lasciviously.

Despite the long black hair, it became no easier for the audience to think of it as a human female in a close-fitting suit of fur. For one thing, its forelegs were as long as its hindlegs and appeared to have an extra joint in them.

Something white squawked and came fluttering upward from behind one of the screens. With a swift leap and slash of foreleg, the great silvery cat struck it down toward the back of the stage and pounced on it.

Everyone in Godshall heard the scream of the snow pigeon and the crack of its neck.

Holding the dead bird to its fangs, the great cat, standing womanly tall now, gave the audience a long look, then walked without haste behind the nearest screen.

There came from the audience a sigh

compounded of loathing and longing, of a wonder as to what would happen next, and of a wish to see what was going on now.

Fafhrd, however, did not sigh. For one thing, the slightest movement might have revealed his hiding place. For another, he could clearly see all that was going on behind both whorl-marked screens.

Being barred from the show by his youth, let alone by Mor's wishes and witcheries, he had half an hour before show time mounted one of the trunk-pillars of Godshall on the precipice side when no one was looking. The strong lacings of the hide walls made it the easiest of climbs. Then he cautiously crawled out onto two of several stout pine branches growing inwards close together over the hall, being very careful to disturb neither browning needles nor drifted snow, until he had found a good viewing hole, one opening toward the stage, but mostly hidden from the audience. Thereafter, it had been simply a matter of holding still enough so that no betraying needles or snow dropped down. Anyone looking up through the gloom and chancing to see parts of his white garb, would take it for snow, he hoped.

Now he watched the two Mingol girls rapidly pull off from Vlane's arms the tight fur sleeves together with the fur-covered, claw-tipped, rigid extra lengths in which they ended and which her hands had been gripping. Next they dragged from Vlane's legs *their* fur coverings, while she sat on a stool and after drawing her fangs off her teeth, speedily unhooked her leopard mask and shoulder piece.

A moment later she slouched back on stage — a cave woman in a brief sarong of silvery fur and lazily gnawing at the end of a long, thick bone. She mimed a cave woman's day: fire-and-baby-tending,

brat-slapping, hide-chewing, and laborious sewing. Things got a bit more exciting with the return of her husband, an unseen presence made visible by her miming.

Her audience followed the story easily, grinning when she demanded what meat her husband had brought, showed dissatisfaction with his meager kill, and refused him an embrace. They guffawed when she tried to clobber him with her chewing bone and got knocked sprawling in return, her children cowering around her.

From that position she scuttled off stage behind another screen, which hid the actors' doorway (normally the Snow Priest's) and also concealed the one-armed Mingol, whose flickering five fingers did all the drum music on the instrument clutched between his feet. Vlane whipped off the rest of her fur, changed the slant of her eyes and eyebrows by four deft strokes of make-up, seemingly in one movement shouldered into a long gray gown with hood, and was back on stage in the persona of a Mingol woman of the Steppes.

After another brief session of miming, she squatted gracefully down at a low, jar-stocked table stage front, and began carefully to make up her face and do her hair, the audience serving as her mirror. She dropped back hood and gown, revealing the briefer red silk garment her fur one had hidden. It was most fascinating to watch her apply the variously colored salves and powders and glittering dusts to her lips, cheeks, and eyes, and see her comb up her dark hair into a high structure kept in place by long, gem-headed pins.

Just then Fafhrd's composure was tested to the uttermost, when a large handful of snow was clapped to his eyes

and held there.

He stayed perfectly still for three heartbeats. Then he captured a rather slender wrist and dragged it down a short distance, meantime gently shaking his head and blinking his eyes.

The trapped wrist twisted free and the clot of snow fell down the neck of the wolfskin coat of Hringorl's man Hor seated immediately below. Hor gave a strange low cry and started to glare upward, but fortunately at that moment Viana pulled down her red silk sarong and began to anoint her nipples with a coral salve.

Fafhrd looked around and saw Mara grinning fiercely at him from where she lay outstretched on the two branches next his, her head level with his shoulder.

"If I'd been an ice gnome, you'd be dead!" she hissed at him. "Or if I'd set my four brothers to trap you, as I should have. Your ears *were* dead, your mind all in your eyes straining toward that skinny harlot. I've heard how you challenged Hringorl for her! And refused his gift of a gold bracelet!"

"I admit, dear, that you slithered up behind me most skillfully and silently," Fafhrd breathed at her softly, "while you seem to have eyes and ears for all things that transpire — and some that don't — at Cold Corner. But I must say, Mara—"

"Hah! Now you'll tell me I shouldn't be here, being a woman. Male prerogatives, intersexual sacrilege, and so forth. Well, neither should you be here."

Fafhrd gravely considered part of that. "No, I think all the women should be here. What they would learn would be much to their interest and advantage."

"To caper like a cat in heat? To slouch about like a silly slave? Yes, I saw those acts too! — while you were drooling dumb and deaf. You men will laugh at anything,

especially when your stupid, gasping, red-faced lust's been aroused by a shameless bitch making a show of her scrawny nakedness!"

Mara's heated hissings were getting dangerously loud and might well have attracted the attention of Hor and others, but once again good fortune intervened, in that there was a ripple of drumming as Viana streaked off the stage, and then there began a wild, somewhat thin but galloping music, the one-armed Mingol being joined by the little Ithmarix playing a nose flute.

"I did not laugh, my dear," Fafhrd breathed somewhat loftily, "nor did I drool or flush or speed my breath, as I am sure you noted. No, Mara, my sole purpose in being here is to learn more about civilization."

She glared at him, grinned, then of a sudden smiled tenderly. "You know, I honestly think you believe that, you incredible infant," she breathed back wonderingly. "Granting that the decadence called civilization could possibly be of interest to anyone, and a capering whore able to carry its message, or rather absence of message."

"I neither think nor believe, I *know* it," Fafhrd replied, ignoring Mara's other remarks. "A whole world calls and have we eyes only for Cold Corner? Watch with me, Mara, and gain wisdom. The actress dances the cultures of all lands and ages. Now she is a woman of the Eight Cities."

Perhaps Mara was in some small part persuaded. Or perhaps it was that Viana's new costume covered her thoroughly — sleeved, green bodice; full, blue skirt, red stockings, and yellow shoes — and that the culture dancer was panting a trifle and showing the cords in her neck from the stamping and whirling dance she was doing. At any rate, the Snow Girl

shrugged and smiled indulgently and whispered, "Well, I must admit it all has a certain disgusting interest."

"I knew you'd understand, dearest. You have twice the mind of any woman of our tribe, aye, or of any man," Fafhrd cooed, caressing her tenderly but somewhat absently as he peered at the stage.

In succession, always making lightning costume changes, Vlana became a houri of the Eastern Lands, a custom-hobbled Quarmallian queen, a languorous concubine of the King of Kings, and a haughty Lankhmar lady wearing a black toga. This last was theatrical license — only the men of Lankhmar wear the toga, but the garment was Lankhmar's chiefest symbol across the world of Nehwon.

Meanwhile Mara did her best to share the eccentric whim of her husband to be. At first she was genuinely intrigued and made mental notes on details of Vlana's dress styles and tricks of behavior which she might herself adopt to advantage. But then she was gradually overwhelmed by a realization of the older woman's superiority in training, knowledge and experience. Vlana's dancing and miming clearly couldn't be learned except with much coaching and drill. And how, and especially where, could a Snow Girl ever wear such clothes? Feelings of inferiority gave way to jealousy and that to hatred.

Civilization was nasty, Vlana ought to be whipped out of Cold Corner, and Fafhrd needed a woman to run his life and keep his mad imagination in check. Not his mother, of course — that awful and incestuous eater of her own son — but a glamorous and shrewd young wife. Himself.

She began to watch Fafhrd intently. He didn't look like an infatuated male, he looked cold as ice, but he was certainly

utterly intent on the scene below. She reminded herself that a few men are adept at hiding their true feelings.

Vlana shed her toga and stood in a wide-meshed tunic of fine silver wires. At each crossing of the wires a tiny silver bell stood out. She shimmied and the bells tinkled, like a tree of tiny birds all chirruping together a hymn to her body. Now her slenderness seemed that of adolescence, while from between the strands of her sleekly cascading hair, her large eyes gleamed with mysterious hints and invitations.

Fafhrd's controlled breathing quickened. So, his dream in the Mingols' tent had been true! His attention, which had half been off to the lands and ages Vlana had danced, centered wholly on her and became desire.

This time his composure was put to an even sorer test, for without warning, Mara's hand clutched his crotch.

But he had little time in which to demonstrate his composure. She let go and crying, "Filthy beast! You *are* lusting!" struck him in the side, below the ribs.

He tried to catch her wrists, while staying on his branches. She kept trying to hit him. The pine boughs creaked and shed snow and needles.

In landing a clout on Fafhrd's ear, Mara's upper body overbalanced, though her feet kept hooked to branchlets.

Growling, "God freeze you, you bitch!" Fafhrd gripped his stoutest bough with one hand and lunged down with the other to catch Mara's arm just beneath the shoulder.

Those looking up from below — and by now there were some, despite the strong counter-attraction of the stage — saw two struggling, white-clad torsos and fair-haired heads dipping out of the branchy

roof, as if about to descend in swan dives. Then, still struggling, the figures withdrew upward.

An older Snow Man cried out, "Sacrilège!" A younger, "Peepers! Let's thrash 'em!" He might have been obeyed, for a quarter of the Snow Men were on their feet by now, if it hadn't been that Essedinex was keeping a close eye on things through a peephole in one of the screens and that he was wise in the ways of handling unruly audiences. He shot a finger at the Mingol behind him, then sharply raised that hand, palm upward.

The music surged. Cymbals clashed. The two Mingol girls and the Ilthmarix bounded on stage stark naked and began to caper around Vlana. The fat Easterner clumped past them and set fire to his great black beard. Blue flames crawled up and flickered before his face and around his ears. He didn't put the fire out — with a wet towel he carried — until Essedinex hoarsely stagewhispered from his peephole, "That's enough. We've got 'em again." The length of the black beard had been halved. Actors make great sacrifices, which the yokels and even their co-mates rarely appreciate.

Fafhrd, dropping the last dozen feet, lighted in the high drift outside Godshall at the same instant Mara finished her downward climb. They faced each other calf-deep in crusted snow, across which the rising, slightly gibbous moon threw streaks of white glimmer and made shadow between them.

Fafhrd asked, "Mara, where did you hear that lie about me challenging Hringorl for the actress?"

"Faithless lecher!" she cried, punched him in the eye, and ran off toward the tent of the women, sobbing and crying strangledly, "I will tell my brothers! You'll see!"

Fafhrd jumped up and down, smothering a howl of pain, sprinted after her three steps, stopped, clapped snow to his pain-stabbed eye, and as soon as it was only throbbing, began to think.

He looked around with the other eye, saw no one, made his way to a clump of snow-laden evergreens on the edge of the precipice, concealed himself among them, and continued to think.

His ears told him that the show was still going at a hot pace inside Godshall. There were laughs and cheers, sometimes drowning the wild drumming and fluting. His eyes — the hit one was working again — told him there was no one near him. They swiveled to the actors' tents at that end of Godshall which lay nearest the new road south, and at the stables beyond them, and at the traders' tents beyond the stables. Then they came back to the nearest tent: Vlana's hemicylindrical one. Crystals clothed it, twinkling in the moonlight, and a giant crystal flatworm seemed to be crawling across its middle just below the evergreen sycamore bough.

He slitheringly walked toward it across the bediamonded snow crust. The knot joining the lacings of its doorway was hidden in shadow and felt complex and foreign. He went to the back of the tent, loosened two pegs, went on belly through the crack like a snake, found himself amongst the hems of the skirts of Vlana's racked garments, took four steps, and lay down on the pallet. A little heat radiated from a banked brazier. After a while he reached to the table and poured himself a cup of brandy.

At last he heard voices. They grew louder. As the lacings of the door were being unknotted and loosened, he felt for his knife and also prepared to draw a large fur rug over himself.

Saying with laughter but also decision,

"No, no, *no*," Vlana swiftly stepped in backwards over the slack lashings, held the door closed with one hand while she gave the lashings a tightening pull with the other, and glanced over her shoulder.

Her look of stark surprise was gone almost before Fafhrd marked it, to be replaced by a quick welcoming grin that wrinkled her nose comically. She turned away from him, carefully drew the lashings tight, and spent some time typing a knot on the inside. Then she came over and knelt beside him where he lay, her body erect from her knees. There was no grin now as she looked down at him, only a composed, enigmatic thoughtfulness, which he sought to match. She was wearing the hooded robe of her Mingol costume.

"So you changed your mind about a reward," she said quietly but matter-of-factly. "How do you know that I too may not have changed mine since?"

Fafhrd shook his head, replying to her first statement. Then, after a pause, he said, "Nevertheless, I have discovered that I desire you."

Vlana said, "I saw you watching the show from ... from the gallery. You almost stole it, you know — I mean the show. Who was the girl with you? Or was it a youth? I couldn't be quite sure."

Fafhrd did not answer her inquiries. Instead he said, "I also wish to ask you questions about your supremely skillful dancing and ... and acting in loneliness."

"Miming." She supplied the word.

"Miming, yes. *And* I want to talk to you about civilization."

"That's right, this morning you asked me how many languages I knew," she said, looking straight across him at the wall of the tent. It was clear that she too was a thinker. She took the cup of brandy out of his hand, swallowed half of what

was left, and returned it to him.

"Very well," she said, at last looking down at him, but with unchanged expression. "I will give you your desire, my dear boy. But now is not the time. First, I must rest and gather strength. Go away and return when the star Shadah sets. Wake me if I slumber."

"That's an hour before dawn," he said, looking up at her. "It will be a chilly wait for me in the snow."

"Don't do that," she said quickly. "I don't want you three-quarters frozen. Go where it's warm. To stay awake, think of me. Don't drink too much wine. Now go."

He got up and made to embrace her. She drew back a step, saying, "Later. Later — everything." He started toward the door. She shook her head, saying, "You might be seen. As you came."

Passing her again, his head brushed something hard. Between the hoops supporting the tent's middle, the supple hide of the tent bulged down, while the hoops themselves were bowed out and somewhat flattened bearing the weight. He cringed down for an instant, ready to grab Vlana and jump any way, then began methodically to punch and sweep at the bulges, always striking outward. There was a crashing and a loud tinkling as the massed crystals, which outside had reminded him of a giant flatworm — must be a giant snow serpent by now! — broke up and showered off.

Meanwhile he said, "The Snow Women do not love you. Nor is Mor my mother your friend."

"Do they think to frighten me with ice crystals?" Vlana demanded contemptuously. "Why, I know of Eastern fire sorceries compared to which their feeble magickings—"

"But you are in *their* territory now, at the mercy of *their* element, which is

crueller and subtler than fire," Fafhrd interposed, brushing away the last of the bulgings, so that the hoops stood up again and the leather stretched almost flat between them. "Do not underrate their powers."

"Thank you for saving my tent from being crumpled. But now — and swiftly — go."

She spoke as if of trivial matters, but her large eyes were thoughtful.

Just before snaking under the back wall, Fafhrd looked over his shoulder. Vlana was gazing at the side wall again, holding the empty cup he had given her, but she caught his movement and, now smiling tenderly, put a kiss in her palm and blew it toward him.

Outside the cold had grown bitter. Nevertheless, Fafhrd went to his clump of evergreens, drew his cloak closely around him, dropped its hood over his forehead, tightened the hood's drawstring, and sat himself facing Vlana's tent.

When the cold began to penetrate his furs, he thought of Vlana.

Suddenly he was crouching and had loosened his knife in its sheath.

A figure was approaching Vlana's tent, keeping to the shadows when it could. It appeared to be clad in black.

Fafhrd silently advanced.

Through the still air came the faint sound of fingernails scratching leather.

There was a flash of dim light as the doorway was opened.

It was bright enough to show the face of Vellix the Venturer. He stepped inside and there was the sound of lacings being drawn tight.

Fafhrd stopped ten paces from the tent and stood there for perhaps two dozen breaths. Then he softly walked past the tent, keeping the same distance.

There was a glow in the doorway of the

high, conical tent of Essedinex. From the stables beyond, a horse whickered twice.

Fafhrd crouched and peered through the low, glowing doorway a knife-cast away. He moved from side to side. He saw a table crowded with jugs and cups set against the sloping wall of the tent opposite the doorway.

To one side of the table sat Essedinex. To the other, Hringorl.

On the watch for Hor, Harrax, or Hrey, Fafhrd circled the tent. He approached it where the table and the two men were faintly silhouetted. Drawing aside his hood and hair, he set his ear against the leather.

"Three gold bars — that's my top," Hringorl was saying surlily. The leather made his voice hollow.

"Five," Essedinex answered, and there was the *slup* of wine mouthed and swallowed.

"Look here, old man," Hringorl countered, his voice at its most gruffly menacing, "I don't need you. I can snatch the girl and pay you nothing."

"Oh no, that won't do, Master Hringorl." Essedinex sounded merry. "For then the Show would never return again to Cold Corner, and how would your tribesmen like that? Nor would there be any more girls brought you by me."

"What matter?" the other answered carelessly. The words were muffled by a gulp of wine, yet Fafhrd could hear the bluff in them. "I have my ship. I can cut your throat this instant and snatch the girl tonight."

"Then do so," Essedinex said brightly. "Only give me a moment for one more quaff."

"Very well, you old miser. Four gold bars."

"Five."

Hringorl cursed sulfurously. "Some

night, you ancient pimp, you will provoke me too far. Besides, the girl is old."

"Aye, in the ways of pleasure. Did I tell you that she once became an acolyte of the Wizards of Azorkah? — so that she might be trained by them to become a concubine of the King of Kings and their spy in the court at Horbori Xen. Aye, and eluded those dread necromancers most cleverly when she had gained the erotic knowledge she desired."

Hringorl laughed with a forced lightness. "Why should I pay even one silver bar for a girl who has been possessed by dozens? Every man's plaything."

"By hundreds," Essedinex corrected. "Skill is gained only by experience, as you know well. And the greater the experience, the greater the skill. Yet this girl is never a plaything. She is the instructress, the revelator, she plays with a man for his pleasure, she can make a man feel king of the universe and perchance — who knows? — even *be* that. What is impossible to a girl who knows the pleasure-ways of the gods themselves? — aye, and of the arch-demons? And yet — you won't believe this, but it's true — she remains in her fashion forever virginal. For no man has ever mastered her."

"That will be seen to!" Hringorl's words were almost a laughing shout. There was the sound of wine gulped. Then his voice dropped. "Very well, five gold bars it is, you usurer. Delivery after tomorrow night's show. The gold paid against the girl."

"Three hours after the show, when the girl's drugged and all's quiet. No need to rouse the jealousy of your fellow tribesmen so soon."

"Make it two hours. Agreed? And now let's talk of next year. I'll want a black

girl, a fullblooded Kleshite. And no five-gold-bar deal ever again. I'll not want a witchy wonder, only youth and great beauty."

Essedinex answered, "Believe me, you won't ever again desire another woman, once you've known and — I wish you luck — mastered Viana. Oh, of course, I suppose—"

Fafhrd reeled back from the tent a half dozen paces and there planted his feet firm and wide, feeling strangely dizzy, or was it drunk? He had early guessed they were almost certainly talking of Viana, but hearing her name spoken made a much greater difference than he'd expected.

The two revelations, coming so close, filled him with a mixed feeling he'd never known before: an overmastering rage and also a desire to laugh hugely. He wanted a sword long enough to slash open the sky and tumble the dwellers in paradise from their beds. He wanted to find and fire off all the Show's sky-rockets into the tent of Essedinex. He wanted to topple Godshall with its pines and drag it across all the actors' tents. He wanted—

He turned round and swiftly made for the stable tent. The one groom was snoring on the straw beside an empty jug and near the light sleigh of Essedinex. Fafhrd noted with a fiendish grin that the horse he knew best happened to be one of Hringorl's. He found a horse collar and a long coil of light, strong rope. Then making reassuring mumbled behind half-closed lips, he led out the chosen horse — a white mare — from the rest. The groom only snored louder.

He again noted the light sleigh. A risk-devil seized him and he unlaced the stiff, pitchy tarpaulin covering the storage space behind the two seats. Beneath it among other things was the Show's

supply of rockets. He selected three of the biggest — with their stout ash tails they were long as ski sticks — and then took time to relace the tarpaulin. He still felt the made desire for destruction, but now it was under a measure of control.

Outside he put the collar on the mare and firmly knotted to it a roomy noose. Then, coiling the rest of the rope and gripping the rockets under his left elbow, he nimbly mounted the mare and walked it near the tent of Essedinex. The two dim silhouettes still confronted each other across the table.

He whirled the noose above his head and cast. It settled around the apex of the tent with hardly a sound, for he was quick to draw in the slack before it rattled against the tent's wall.

The noose tightened around the top of the tent's central mast. Containing his excitement, he walked the mare toward the forest across the moon-bright snow, paying out the rope. When there were only four coils of it left, he urged the mare into a lope. He crouched over the collar, holding it firm, his heels clamped to the mare's sides. The rope strained. There was a satisfying, muffled *crack* behind him. He shouted a triumphant laugh. The mare plunged on against the rope's irregular restraint. Looking back, he saw the tent dragging after them. He saw fire and heard yells of surprise and anger. Again he shouted his laughter.

At the edge of the forest he drew his knife and slashed the rope. Vaulting down, he buzzed approvingly in the mare's ear and gave her a slap on the flank that set her cantering toward the stable. He considered firing off the rockets toward the fallen tent, but decided it would be anticlimax. With them still clamped under his elbow, he walked into the edge of the woods. So

hidden, he started home. He walked lightly to minimize footprints, found a branch of fringe pine and dragged it behind him, and when he could, he walked on rock.

His mountainous humor was gone and his rage too, replaced by black depression. He no longer hated Vellix or even Vlana, but civilization seemed a tawdry thing, unworthy of his interest. He was glad he had spilled Hringorl and Essedinex, but they were woodlice. He himself was a lonely ghost, doomed to roam the Cold Waste.

He thought of walking north through the woods until he found a new life or froze, of fetching and strapping on his skis and attempting to leap the tabooed gap that had been the death of Skif, of getting sword and challenging Hringorl's henchmen all at once, and of a hundred other doom-treadings.

The tents of the Snow Clan looked like pale mushrooms in the light of the crazily glaring moon. Some were cones topping a squat cylinder; others, bloated hemispheres, turnip shapes. Like mushrooms, they did not quite touch the ground at the edges. Their floors of packed branches, carpeted with hides and supported by heavier boughs, stood on and overhung chunky posts, so that a tent's heat would not turn the frozen ground below it to a mush.

The huge, silvery trunk of a dead snow oak, ending in what looked like a giant's split fingernails, where an old lightning bolt had shattered it midway up, marked the site of Mor's and Fafhrd's tent — and also of his father's grave, which the tent overlay. Each year it was pitched just so.

There were lights in a few of the tents and in the great Tent of the Women lying beyond in the direction of Godshall, but Fafhrd could see no one abroad. With a

dispirited grunt he headed for his home door, then remembering the rockets, he veered toward the dead oak. It was smooth surfaced, the bark long gone. The few remaining branches were likewise bare and broken off short, the lowest of them appearing well out of reach.

A few paces away he paused for another look around. Assured of secrecy, he raced toward the oak and making a vertical leap more like a leopard's than a man's, he caught hold of the lowest branch with his free hand and whipped himself up onto it before his upward impetus was altogether spent.

Standing lightly on the dead branch with a finger touching the trunk, he made a final scan for peepers and late walkers, then with pressure of fingers and tease of fingernails, opened in the seemingly seamless gray wood a doorway tall as himself but scarcely half as wide. Feeling past skis and ski sticks, he found a long thin shape wrapped thrice around with lightly oiled sealskin. Undoing it, he uncovered a powerful looking bow and a quiver of long arrows. He added the rockets to it, replaced the wrappings, then shut the queer door of his tree-safe and dropped to the snow below, which he brushed smooth.

Entering his home tent, he felt again like a ghost and made as little noise as one. The odors of home comforted him uncomfortably and against his will; smells of meat, cooking, old smoke, hides, sweat, the chamberpot, Mor's faint, sour-sweet stench. He crossed the springy floor and, fully clad, he stretched himself in his sleeping furs. He felt tired as death. The silence was profound. He couldn't hear Mor's breathing. He thought of his last sight of his father, blue and shut-eyed, his broken limbs straightened, his best sword naked at his side with his slate-colored



fingers fitted around the hilt. He thought of Nalgron now in the earth under the tent, worm-gnawed to a skeleton, the sword black rust, the eyes open now — sockets staring upward through solid dirt. He remembered his last sight of his father alive: a tall wolfskin cloak striding away with Mor's warnings and threats spattering against it. Then the skeleton came back into his mind. It was a night for ghosts.

"Fafhrd?" Mor called softly from across the tent.

Fafhrd stiffened and held his breath. When he could no longer, he began to let it out and draw it in, open-mouthed, in noiseless draughts.

"Fafhrd?" The voice was a little louder, though still like a ghost cry. "I heard you come in. You're not asleep."

No use keeping silent. "You haven't slept either, mother?"

"The old sleep little."

That wasn't true, he thought. Mor wasn't old, even by the Cold Waste's merciless measure. At the same time, it *was* the truth. Mor was as old as the tribe, the Waste itself, as old as death.

Mor said composedly — Fafhrd knew she had to be lying on her back, staring straight upward — "I am willing that you should take Mara to wife. Not pleased, but willing. There is need for a strong back here, so long as you daydream, shooting your thoughts like arrows loosed high and at random, and prank about and gad after actresses and such gilded dirt. Besides, you have got Mara with child and her family does not altogether lack status."

"Mara spoke to you tonight?" Fafhrd asked. He tried to keep his voice dispassionate, but the words came out strangledly.

"As any Snow Girl should. Except she

ought to have told me earlier. And you earlier still. But you have inherited threefold your father's secretiveness along with his urge to neglect his family and indulge himself in useless adventurings. Except that in you the sickness takes a more repulsive form. Cold mountaintops were his mistresses, while you are drawn to civilization, that putrid festering of the hot south, where there is no natural stern cold to punish the foolish and luxurious and to see that the decencies are kept. But you will discover that there is a witchy cold that can follow you anywhere in Nehwon. Ice once went down and covered all the hot lands, in punishment for an earlier cycle of lecherous evil. And wherever ice once went, witchery can send it again. You will come to believe that, and shed your sickness, or else you will learn as your father learned."

Fafhrd tried to make the accusation of husband-murder that he had hinted at so easily this morning, but the words stuck, not in his throat, but in his very mind, which felt invaded. Mor had long ago made his heart cold. Now, up in his brain, she was creating among his privatest thoughts crystals which distorted everything and prevented him from using against her the weapons of duty coldly performed and joined by a cold reason which let him keep his integrity. He felt as if there were closing in on him forever the whole world of cold, in which the rigidity of ice and the rigidity of morals and the rigidity of thought were all one.

As if sensing her victory and permitting herself to joy in it a little, Mor said in the same dead, reflective tones, "Aye, your father now bitterly regrets Gran Hanack, White Fang, the Ice Queen, and all his other mountain paramours. They cannot help him now. They have forgotten him. He stares up endlessly from lidless

sockets at the home he despised and now yearns for, so near, yet so impossibly far. His fingerbones scrabble feebly against the frozen earth, he tries futilely to twist under its weight..."

Fafhrd heard a faint scratching, perhaps of icy twigs against tent leather, but his hair rose. Yet he could move no other part of him, he discovered as he tried to lift himself. The blackness all around him was a vast weight. He wondered if Mor had magicked him down under the ground beside his father. Yet it was a greater weight than that of eight feet of frozen earth that pressed on him. It was the weight of the entire Cold Waste and its killingness, of the taboos and contempt and shut-mindedness of the Snow Clan, of the pirate greed and loutish lust of Hringorl, of even Mara's merry self-absorption and bright, half-blind mind, and atop them all Mor with ice crystals forming on her fingertips as she wove them in a binding spell.

And then he thought of Vлана.

It may not have been the thought of Vлана that did it. A star may have chanced to crawl across the tent's tiny smoke-hole and shoot its tiny silver arrow into the pupil of one of his eyes. It may have been that his held breath suddenly puffed out and his lungs automatically sucked another breath in, showing him that his muscles *could* move.

At any rate he shot up and dashed for the doorway. He dared not stop for the lashings, because Mor's ice-jagged fingers were clutching at him. Instead he ripped the brittle, old leather with one downward sweep of his clawed right hand and then *leaped* from the door, because Nalgron's skeletal arms were straining toward him from the narrow black space between the frozen ground and the tent's elevated floor.

And then he ran as he had never run before. He ran as if all the ghosts of the Cold Waste were at his heels — and in some fashion they were. He passed the last of the Snow Clan's tents, all dark, and the faintly tinkling Tent of the Women, and sprinted out onto the gentle slope, all silvered by the moon, leading down to the upcurving lip of Trollstep Canyon. He felt the urge to dash off that verge, challenging the air to uphold him and bear him south or else hurl him to instant oblivion — and for a moment there seemed nothing to choose between those two fates.

Then he was running not so much away from the cold and its crippling, supernatural horrors, as toward civilization, which was once again a bright emblem in his brain, an answer to all small-mindedness.

He slowed down a little and some sense came back into his head, so that he peered for living late-walkers as well as for demons and fetches.

He noted Shadah twinkling blue in the western treetops.

He was walking by the time he reached Godshall. He went between it and the canyon's rim, which no longer tugged him.

He noted that Essedinex's tent had been set up again and was once more lit. No new snow worm crawled across Vлана's tent. The snow sycamore bough above it glittered with crystals in the moonlight.

He entered without warning by the back door, silently drawing out the loosened pegs and then thrusting together under the wall and the hems of the racked costumes his head and right fist, the latter gripping his drawn knife.

Vлана lay asleep alone on her back on the pallet, a red, woolen, light blanket

drawn up to her naked armpits. The lamp burned yellow and small, yet brightly enough to show all the interior and no one but her. The unbanked and newly stoked brazier radiated heat.

Fafhrd came all the way in, sheathed his knife, and stood looking down at the actress. Her arms seemed very slender, her hands long-fingered and a shade large. With her big eyes shut, her face seemed rather small at the center of its glory of outspread, dark brown hair. Yet it looked both noble and knowing and its moist, long, generous lips, newly and carefully carmined, roused and tempted him. Her skin had a faint sheen of oil. He could smell its perfume.

For a moment Vlana's supine posture reminded him of both Mor and Nalgron, but this thought was instantly swept away by the brazier's fierce heat, like that of a small wrought-iron sun, by the rich textures and graceful instruments of civilization all around him, and by Vlana's beauty and couth grace, which seemed self-aware even in sleep. She was civilization's sigil.

He moved back toward the rack and began to strip off his clothes and neatly fold and pile them. Vlana did not wake, or at least her eyes did not open.

Getting back under the red blanket again some time later, after crawling out to relieve himself, Fafhrd said, "Now tell me about civilization and your part in it."

Vlana drank half of the wine Fafhrd had fetched her on his way back, then stretched luxuriously, her head resting on her intertwined hands.

"Well, to begin with, I'm not a princess, though I liked being called one," she said lightly. "I must inform you that you have not got yourself even a lady, darlingest boy. As for civilization, it

stinks."

"No," Fafhrd agreed, "I have got myself the skillfullest and most glamorous actress in all Nehwon. But why has civilization an ill odor for you?"

"I think I must disillusion you still further, beloved," Vlana said, somewhat absently rubbing her side against his. "Otherwise you might get silly notions about me and even devise silly plans."

"If you're talking about pretending to be a whore in order to gain erotic knowledge and other wisdoms—" Fafhrd began.

She glanced at him in considerable surprise and interrupted rather sharply, "I'm worse than a whore, by some standards. I'm a thief. Yes, Red Ringlets, a cutpurse and filchpocket, a roller of drunks, a burglar and alleybasher. I was born a farm girl, which I suppose makes me lower still to a hunter, who lives by the death of animals and keeps his hands out of the dirt and reaps no harvest except with the sword. When my parents' plot of land was confiscated by the law's trickery to make a tiny corner of one of the new, vast, slave-worked, Lankhmar-owned grain farms, and they in consequence starved to death, I determined to get my own back from the grain merchants. Lankhmar City would feed me, aye, feed me well! — and be paid only with lumps and perhaps a deep scratch or two. So to Lankhmar I went. Falling in there with a clever girl of the same turn of mind and some experience, I did well for two full rounds of moons and a few more. We worked only in black garb, and called ourselves to ourselves the Dark Duo.

"For a cover, we danced, chiefly in the twilight hours, to fill in the time before the big-name entertainers. A little later we began to mime too, taught by a famous actor fallen by wine on evil days,

the darlinest and courtliest old trembler who ever begged for a drink at dawn or contrived to fondle a girl one quarter his age at dusk. And so, as I say, I did quite well ... until I fell afoul, as my parents had, of the law. No, not the Overlord's courts, dear boy, and his prisons and racks and head-and-hand-chopping blocks, though they are a shame crying to the stars. No, I ran afoul of a law older even than Lankhmer's and a court less merciful. In short, my friend's and my own cover was finally blown by the Thieves' Guild, a most ancient organization with locals in every city of the civilized world with a hidebound law against female membership and with a deep detestation of all freelance pilferers. Back on the farm I had heard of the Guild and hoped in my innocence to become worthy to join it, but soon learned their byword, 'Sooner give a cobra a kiss, than a secret to a woman.' Incidentally, sweet scholar of civilization's arts, such women as the Guild must use as lures and attention-shifters and such, they hire by the half hour from the Whore's Guild.

"I was lucky. At the moment when I was supposed to be slowly strangling somewhere else, I was stumbling over Vilis' body, having looped swiftly home to get a key I'd forgot. I lit a lamp in our close-shuttered abode and saw the long agony in Vilis' face and the red silken cord buried deep in her neck. But what filled me with the hottest rage and coldest hate — besides a second measure of knee-melting fear — was that they had strangled old Hinerio too. Vilis and I were at least competitors and so perhaps fair game by civilization's malodorous standards, but he had never even suspected us of thievery. He had assumed merely that we had other lovers or else — and also — erotic clients.

"So I scuttled out of Lankhmar as swiftly as a spied crab, eyes behind me for pursuit, and in Ilthmar encountered Essedine's troupe, headed north for the off-season. By good fortune they needed a leading mime and my skill was sufficient to satisfy old Seddy.

"But at the same time, I swore an oath by the morning star to avenge the deaths of Vilis and Hinerio. And some day I shall! With proper plans and help and a new cover. More than one high potentate of the Thieves' Guild will learn how it feels to have his weasand narrowed a fingerclip's breadth at a time, aye, and worse things!

"But this is a hellish topic for a comfy morning, lover, and I raise it only to show you why you must not get deeply involved with a dirty and vicious one such as me."

Vlana turned her body then so that it leaned against Fafhrd's and she kissed him from the corner of the lip to the lobe of the ear, but when he would have returned these courtesies in full measure and more, she carried away his groping hands and bracing herself on his arms, thereby confining them, pushed herself up and gazed at him with her enigma look, saying, "Dearest boy, it is the gray of dawn and soon comes the pink and you must leave me at once, or at most after a last engagement. Go home, marry that lovely and nimble tree-girl — I'm sure now it was not a male youth — and live your proper, arrow-straight life far from the stinks and snares of civilization. The Show packs up and leaves early, day after tomorrow, and I have my crooked destiny to tread. When your blood has cooled, you will feel only contempt for me. Nay, deny it not — I know men! Though there is a tiny chance that you, being you, will recall me with a little pleasure. In which case I advise one thing only: never hint of

it to your wife!"

Fafhrd matched her enigma look and answered, "Princess, I've been a pirate, which is nothing but a water thief, who often raids folk poor as your parents. While barbarism can match civilization's every stench. Not one move in our frostbit lives but is strictured by a mad god's laws, which we call customs, and by blackhanded irrationalities from which there is no escape. My own father was condemned to death by bone-breaking by a court I dare not name. His offense: climbing a mountain. And there are murders and thievings and pimpings and — Oh, there are tales I could tell you if—"

He broke off to lift his hands so that he was holding her half above him, grasping her gently below the armpits, rather than she propped on her arms. "Let me come south with you, Vlana," he said eagerly, "whether as member of your troupe or moving alone — though I *am* a singing skald, I can also sword dance, juggle four whirling daggers, and hit with one at ten paces a mark the size of my thumbnail. And when we get to Lankhmar City, perhaps disguised as two Northerners, for you are tall, I'll be your good right arm of vengeance. I can thief by land, too, believe me, and stalk a victim through alleys, I should think, as sightlessly and silently as through forests. I can—"

Vlana, supported by his hands, laid a palm across his lips while her other hand wandered idly under the long hair at the back of his neck. "Darling," she said, "I doubt not that you are brave and loyal and skillful for a lad of eighteen. And you make love well enough for a youth — quite well enough to hold your white-furred girl and mayhap a few more wenches, if you choose. But — despite your ferocious words — forgive my frankness — I sense in you honesty,

nobility even, a love of fair play, and a hatred of torture. While the lieutenant I seek for my revenge must be cruel and treacherous and fell as a serpent, while knowing at least as much as I of the fantastically twisty ways of the great cities and the ancient guilds. And, to be blunt, he must be old as I, which you miss by almost the fingers of two hands. So come kiss me, dear boy, and pleasure me once more and—"

Fafhrd suddenly sat up, and lifted her a little and sat her down, so that she sat sideways on his thighs, he shifting his grasp to her shoulders.

"No," he said firmly. "I see nothing to be gained by subjecting you once more to my inexpert caresses. But—"

"I was afraid you would take it that way," she interrupted unhappily. "I did not mean—"

"But," he continued with cool authority, "I want to ask you one question. Have you already chosen your lieutenant?"

"I will not answer that," she replied, eying him as coolly and confidently.

"Is he—?" he began and then pressed his lips together, catching the name "Vellix" before it was uttered.

She looked at him with undisguised curiosity as to what his next move would be. "Very well," he said at last, dropping his hands from her shoulders and propping himself with them. "You have tried, I think, to act in what you believe to be my best interests, so I will return like with like. What I have to reveal indites barbarism and civilization equally." And he told her of Essedinex' and Hringorl's plan for her.

She laughed heartily when he was done, though he fancied she had turned a shade pale.

"I must be slipping," she commented.

"So that was why my somewhat subtle mimings so easily pleased Seddy's rough and ready tastes, and why there was a place open for me in the troupe, and why he did not insist I whore for him after the show, as the other girls must." She looked at Fafhrd sharply. "Some pranksters overset Seddy's tent this midnight. Was it—?"

He nodded. "I was in a strange humor, last night, merry yet furious."

Honest, delighted laughter from her then, followed by another of the sharp looks. "So you did not go home when I sent you away after the show?"

"Not until afterwards," he said. "No, I stayed and watched."

She looked at him in a tender, mocking, wondering way which asked quite plainly, "And what did you see?" But this time he found it very easy not to name Vellix.

"So you're a gentleman, too," she joked. "But why didn't you tell me about Hringor's base scheme earlier? Did you think I'd become too frightened to be amorous?"

"A little of that," he admitted, "but it was chiefly that I did not decide until this moment to warn you. Truth to tell, I only came back to you tonight because I was frightened by ghosts, though later I found other good reasons. Indeed, just before I came to your tent, fear and loneliness — yes, and a certain jealousy too — had me minded to hurl myself into Trollsten Canyon, or else don skis and attempt the next-to-impossible leap which has teased my courage for years—"

She clutched his upper arm, digging in fingers. "Never do that," she said very seriously. "Hold onto life. Think only of yourself. The worst always changes for the better — or oblivion."

"Yes, so I was thinking when I would have let the air over the canyon decide my

destiny. Would it cradle me or dash me down? But selfishness, of which I've a plenty whatever you think — that and a certain leeriness of all miracles — quashed that whim. Also, I was earlier half minded to trample your tent before pulling down the Show Master's. So there is some evil in me, you see. Aye, and a shut-mouthed deceitfulness."

She did not laugh, but studied his face most thoughtfully. Then for a time the enigma look came back into her eyes. For a moment Fafhrd thought he could peer past it, and he was troubled, for what he thought he glimpsed behind those large, brown-irised pupils was not a sibyl surveying the universe from a mountaintop, but a merchant with scales in which he weighed objects most carefully, at whiles noting down in a little book old debts and new bribes and alternate plans for gain.

But it was only one troubling glimpse, so his heart joyed when Vlana, whom his big hands still held tilted above him, smiled down into his eyes and said, "I will now answer your question, which I would and could not earlier. For I have only this instant decided that my lieutenant will be ... *you*. Hug me on it!"

Fafhrd grappled her with eager warmth and a strength that made her squeal, but then just before his body had fired unendurably, she pushed up from him, saying breathlessly, "Wait, wait! We must first lay our plans."

"Afterwards, my love. Afterwards," he pleaded, straining her down.

"No!" she protested sharply. "Afterwards loses too many battles to Too Late. If you are lieutenant, I am captain and give directions."

"Harkening in obedience," he said, giving way. "Only be swift."

"We must be well away from Cold

Corner before kidnap time," she said. "Today I must gather my things together and provide us with sleigh, swift horses, and a store of food. Leave all that to me. You behave today exactly as is your wont, keeping well away from me, in case our enemies set spies on you, as both Seddy and Hringorl are most like to do—"

"Very well, very well," Fafhrd agreed hurriedly. "And now, my sweetest—"

"Hush and have patience! To cap your deception, climb into the roof of Godshall well before the show, just as you did last night. There just might be an attempt to kidnap me during the show — Haringorl or his men becoming overeager, or Hringorl seeking to cheat Seddy of his gold — and I'll feel safest with you on watch. Then when I exit after wearing the toga and the silver bells, come you down swiftly and meet me at the stable. We'll escape during the break between the first and second halves of the show, when one way or another all are too intent on what more's coming, to take note of us. You've got that? Stay far away today? Hide in the roof? Join me at the halves break? Very well! And now, darlingest lieutenant, banish all discipline. Forget every atom of respect you owe your captain and—"

But now it was Fafhrd's turn to delay. Vlana's talk had allowed time for his own worries to rouse and he held her away from him although she had knit her hands behind his neck and was straining to draw their two bodies together.

He said, "I will obey you in every particular. Only one warning more, which it's vital you heed. Think as little as you can today about our plans, even while performing actions vital to them. Keep them hid behind the scenery of your other thoughts. As I shall mine, you may be sure. For Mor my mother is a great reader

of minds."

"Your mother! Truly she has overawed you inordinately, darling, in a fashion which makes me itch to set you wholly free — oh, do not hold me off! Why, you speak of her as if she were the Queen of Witches."

"And so she is, make no mistake," Fafhrd assured her dourly. "She is the great white spider, while the whole Cold Waste, both above and below, is her web, on which we flies must go tippy-toe, o'erstepping sticky stretches. You *will* heed me?"

"Yes, yes, yes! And now—"

He brought her slowly down toward him, as a man might put a wineskin to his mouth, tantalizing himself. Their skins met. Their lips poised.

Fafhrd became aware of a profound silence above, around, below, as if the very earth were holding her breath. It frightened him.

They kissed, drinking deeply of each other, and his fear was drowned.

They parted for breath. Fafhrd reached out and pinched the lamp's wick so that the flame fled and the tent was dark except for the cold silver of dawn seeping in by cranny and crack. His fingers stung. He wondered why he'd done it — they'd loved by lamplight before. Again fear came.

He clasped Vlana tightly in the hug that banishes all fears.

And then of a sudden — he could not possibly have told why — he was rolling over and over with her toward the back of the tent. His hands gripping her shoulders, his legs clamped hers together, he was hurling her sideways over him and then himself over her in swiftest alteration.

There was a *crack* like thunder and the jolt of a giant's fist hammered against the

granite-frozen ground behind them, where the middle of the tent became nothing high, while the hoops above them leaned sharply that way, drawing the tent's leather skin after.

They rolled into the racked garments spilling down. There was a second monster *crack* followed by a crashing and a crunching like some super-giant beast snapping up a behemoth and crunching it between its jaws. Earth quivered for a space.

Then all was silent after that great noise and ground-shaking, except for the astonishment and fear buzzing in their ears. They clutched each other like terrified children.

Fafhrd recovered himself first. "Dress!" he told Vlna and squirmed under the back of the tent and stood up naked in the biting cold under the pinkening sky.

The great bough of the snow sycamore, its crystals dashed off in a vast heap, lay athwart the middle of the tent, pressing it and the pallet beneath into the frozen earth.

The rest of the sycamore, robbed of its great balancing bough, had fallen entire in the opposite direction and lay mounded around with shaken-off crystals. Its black, hairy, broken-off roots were nakedly exposed.

All the crystals shone with a pale flesh-pink from the sun.

Nothing moved anywhere, not even a wisp of breakfast smoke. Sorcery had struck a great hammerstroke and none had noted it except the intended victims.

Fafhrd, beginning to shake, slithered under again. Vlna had obeyed his word and was dressing with an actress's swiftness. Fafhrd hurried into his own garments, piled so providentially at this end of the tent. He wondered if he had

been under a god's directions in doing that and in snuffing out the lamp, which else by now would have had the crushed tent flaming.

His clothes felt colder than the icy air, but he knew that would change.

He crawled with Vlna outside once more. As they stood up, he faced her toward the fallen bough with the great crystal heap around it and said, "Now laugh at the witchy powers of my mother and her coven and all the Snow Women."

Vlna said doubtfully, "I see only a bough that was overweighted with ice."

Fafhrd said, "Compare the mass of crystals and snow that was shaken off that bough with those elsewhere. Remember: hide your thoughts!"

Vlna was silent.

A black figure was racing toward them from the traders' tents. It grew in size as it grotesquely bounded.

Vellix the Venturer was gasping as he stamped to a stop and seized Vlna's arms. Controlling his breathing, he said, "I dreamed a dream of you struck down and mashed. Then a thunderclap waked me."

Vlna answered, "You dreamed the beginning of the truth, but in a matter like this, almost is as good as not at all."

Vellix at last saw Fafhrd. Lines of jealous anger engraved his face and his hand went to the dagger at his belt.

"Hold!" Vlna commanded sharply. "I had indeed been mashed to a mummy, except that this youth's senses, which ought to have been utterly engrossed in something else, caught the first cues of the bough's fall, and he whipped me out of death's way in the very nick. Fafhrd's his name."

Vellix changed his hand's movement into part of a low bow, sweeping his other arm out wide.

"I am much indebted to you, young man," he said warmly, and then after a pause, "for saving the life of a notable *artiste*."

By now other figures were in view, some hurrying toward them from the nearby actors' tents, others at the doors of the far-off Snow Tribes' tents and not moving at all.

Pressing her cheek to Fafhrd's, as if in formal gratitude, Vlana whispered rapidly, "Remember my plan for tonight and for all our future rapture. Do not depart a jot from it. Efface yourself."

Fafhrd managed, "Beware ice and snow. Act without thought."

To Vellix, Vlana said more distantly, though with courtesy and kindness, "Thank you, sir, for your concern for me, both in your dreams and your wakings."

From out a fur robe, whose collar topped his ears, Essedinex greeted with gruff humor, "It's been a hard night on tents." Vlana shrugged.

The women of the troupe gathered around her with anxious questions and she talked with them privately as they walked to the actors' tent and went in through the girls' door-flap.

Vellix frowned after her and pulled at his black mustache.

The male actors stared and shook their heads at the beating the hemicylindrical tent had taken.

Vellix said to Fafhrd with warm friendliness, "I offered you brandy before and now I'd guess you need it. Also, since yestermorning I've had a great desire to talk with you."

"Your pardon, but once I sit I will not be able to stay awake for a word, were they wise as owls', nor for even a brandy swig," Fafhrd answered politely, hiding a great yawn which was only half feigned. "But I thank you."

"It appears I am fated always to ask at the wrong time," Vellix commented with a shrug. "Perhaps at noon? Or midafternoon?" he added swiftly.

"The latter, if it please you," Fafhrd replied and rapidly walked off, taking great strides, toward the trading tents. Vellix did not seek to keep up with him.

Fafhrd felt more satisfied than he ever had in his life. The thought that tonight he would forever escape this stupid snow world and its man-chaining women almost made him nostalgic about Cold Corner. Thought-guard! he told himself. Feelings of eerie menace or else his hunger for sleep turned his surroundings spectral, like a childhood scene revisited.

He drained a white porcelain tankard of wine given him by his Mingol friends Zax and Effendrit, let them conduct him to a glossy pallet hidden by piles of other furs, and fell at once into a deep sleep.

After eons of absolute, pillowy darkness, lights came softly on. Fafhrd sat beside Nalgron his father at a stout banquet table crowded with all savory foods smoking hot and all fortified wines in jugs of earthenware, stone, silver, crystal and gold. There were other feasters lining the table, but Fafhrd could make nothing of them except their dark silhouettes and the sleepy sound of their unceasing talk too soft to be understood, like many streams of murmuring water, though with occasional bursts of low laughter, like small waves running up and returning down a gravelly beach. While the dull clash of knife and spoon against plate and each other was like the clank of the pebbles in that surf.

Nalgron was clad and cloaked in ice-bear furs of the whitest with pins and chains and wristlets and rings of purest silver, and there was silver also in his hair, which troubled Fafhrd. In his left

hand he held a silver goblet, which at intervals he touched to his lips, but he kept his eating hand under his cloak.

Nalgron was discoursing wisely, tolerantly, almost tenderly of many matters. He directed his gaze here and there around the table, yet spoke so quietly that Fafhrd knew his conversation was directed at his son alone.

Fafhrd also knew he should be listening intently to every word and carefully stowing away each aphorism, for Nalgron was speaking of courage, of honor, of prudence, of thoughtfulness in giving and punctilio in keeping your word, of following your heart, of setting and unswervingly striving toward a high, romantic goal, of self-honesty in all these things but especially in recognizing your aversions and desires, of the need to close your ears to the fears and naggings of women, yet freely forgive them all their jealousies, attempted trammelings, and even extremest wickednesses, since those all sprang from their ungovernable love, for you or another, and of many a different matter most useful to know for a youth on manhood's verge.

But although he knew this much, Fafhrd heard his father only in snatches, for he was so troubled by the gauntness of Nalgron's cheek and by the leanness of the strong fingers lightly holding the silver goblet and by the silver in his hair, and a faint overlay of blue on his ruddy lips, although Nalgron was most sure and even sprightly in every movement, gesture, and word, that he was compelled to be forever searching the steaming platters and bowls around him for especially succulent portions to spoon or fork onto Nalgron's wide, silver plate to tempt his appetite.

Whenever he did this, Nalgron would look toward him with a smile and a

courteous nod, and with love in his eyes, and then touch his goblet to his lips and return to his discourings, but never would he uncover his eating hand.

As the banquet progressed, Nalgron began to speak of matters yet more important, but now Fafhrd heard hardly one of the precious words, so greatly agitated was he by his concern for his father's health. Now the thin skin seemed stretched to bursting on the jutting cheek-bone, the bright eyes ever more sunken and dark-ringed, the blue veins more bulgingly a-crawl across the stout tendons of the hand lightly holding the silver goblet — and Fafhrd had begun to suspect that although Nalgron often let the wine touch his lips he drank never a drop.

"Eat, father," Fafhrd pleaded in a low voice taut with concern. "At least drink."

Again the look, the smile, the agreeable nod, the bright eyes warmer still with love, the brief tipping of goblet against unparted lips, the looking away, the tranquil, unattendable discourse resumed.

And now Fafhrd knew fear, for the lights were growing blue and he realized that none of the black, unfeatured fellow-feasters were or had all the while been lifting so much as hand, let alone cup-rim, to mouth, though making an unceasing dull clatter with their cutlery. His concern for his father became an agony and before he rightly knew what he was doing, he had brushed back his father's cloak and gripped his father's right arm at forearm and wrist and so shoved his eating hand toward his high-piled plate.

Then Nalgron was not nodding, but thrusting his head at Fafhrd, and not smiling, but grinning in such fashion as to show all his teeth of old ivory hue, whilst

his eyes were cold, cold, cold.

The hand and arm that Fafhrd gripped felt like, looked like, *were* bare brown bone.

Of a sudden shaking violently in all his parts, but chiefly in his arms, Fafhrd recoiled swift as a serpent down the bench.

Then Fafhrd was not shaking, but being shaken by strong hands of flesh on his shoulders, and instead of the dark there was the faintly translucent hide of the Mingols' tent-roof, and in place of his father's face the sallow-cheeked, black-mustached one, somber yet concerned, of Vellix the Venturer.

Fafhrd stared dazedly, then shook his shoulders and head to bring a quicker-tempoed life back into his body and throw off the gripping hands.

But Vellix had already let go and seated himself on the next pile of furs.

"Your pardon, young warrior," he said gravely. "You appeared to be having a dream no man would care to continue."

His manner and the tone of his voice were like the nightmare-Nalgron's. Fafhrd pushed up on an elbow, yawned, and with a shuddery grimace shook himself again.

"You're chilled in body, mind, or both," Vellix said. "So we've good excuse for the brandy I promised."

He brought up from beside him two small silver mugs in one hand and in the other a brown jug of brandy which he now uncorked with that forefinger and thumb.

Fafhrd frowned inwardly at the dark tarnish on the mugs and at the thought of what might be crusted or dusted in their bottoms, or perhaps that of one only. With a troubled twinge, he reminded himself that this man was his rival for Vlana's affections.

"Hold," he said as Vellix prepared to

pour. "A silver cup played a nasty role in my dream. Zax!" he called to the Mingol looking out the tent door. "A porcelain mug, if you please!"

"You take the dream as a warning against drinking from silver?" Vellix inquired softly with an ambiguous smile.

"No," Fafhrd answered, "but it instilled an antipathy into my flesh, which still crawls." He wondered a little that the Mingols had so casually let in Vellix to sit beside him. Perhaps the three were old acquaintances from the trading camps. Or perhaps there'd been bribery.

Vellix chuckled and became freer of manner. "Also, I've fallen into filthy ways, living without a woman or servant. Effendrit! Make that two porcelain mugs, clean as newly-debarked birch!"

It was indeed the other Mingol who had been standing by the door — Vellix knew them better than Fafhrd did. The Venturer immediately handed over one of the gleaming white mugs. He poured a little of the nose-tickling drink into his own porcelain mug, then a generous gush for Fafhrd, then more for himself — as if to demonstrate that Fafhrd's drink could not possibly be poisoned or drugged. And Fafhrd, who had been watching closely, could find no fault in the demonstration. They lightly clinked mugs and when Vellix drank deeply, Fafhrd took a large though carefully slow sip. The stuff burnt gently.

"It's my last jug," Vellix said cheerfully. "I've traded my whole stock for amber, snow-gems, and other smalls — aye, and my tent and cart too, everything but my two horses and our gear and winter rations."

"I've heard your horses are the swiftest and hardiest on the Steppes," Fafhrd remarked.

"That's too large a claim. Here they

rank well, no doubt."

"Here!" Fafhrd said contemptuously.

Vellix eyed him as Nalgron had in all but the last part of the dream. Then he said, "Fafhrd — I may call you that? Call me Vellix. May I make a suggestion? May I give you advice such as I might give son of mine?"

"Surely," Fafhrd answered, feeling not only uncomfortable now but wary.

"You're clearly restless and dissatisfied here. So is any sound young man, anywhere, at your age. The wide world calls you. You've an itching foot. Yet let me say this: It takes more than wit and prudence — aye, and wisdom, too — to cope with civilization and find any comfort. That requires low cunning, a smirching of yourself as civilization is smirched. You cannot climb to success there as you climb a mountain, no matter how icy and treacherous. The latter demands all your best. The former, much of your worst — a calculated self-evil you have yet to experience, and need not. I was born a renegade. My father was a man of the Eight Cities who rode with the Mingols. I wish now I had stuck to the Steppes myself, cruel as they are, nor harkened to the corrupting call of Lankmar and the Eastern Lands.

"I know, I know, the folk here are narrow-visioned, custom-bound. But matched with the twisted minds of civilization, they're straight as pines. With your natural gifts you'll easily be a chief here — more, in sooth, a chief paramount, weld a dozen clans together, make the Northerners a power for nations to reckon with. Then, if you wish, you can challenge civilization. On your terms, not hers."

Fafhrd's thoughts and feelings were like choppy water, though he had outwardly become almost preternaturally calm.

There was even a current of glee in him, that Vellix rated a youth's chances with Vlna so high that he would ply him with flattery as well as brandy.

But across all other currents, making the chop sharp and high, was the impression, hard to shake, that the Venturer was not altogether dissimulating, that he did feel like a father toward Fafhrd, that he was truly seeking to save him hurt, that what he said of civilization had an honest core. Of course that might be because Vellix felt so sure of Vlna that he could afford to be kind to a rival. Nevertheless...

Nevertheless, Fafhrd now once again felt more uncomfortable than anything else.

He drained his mug. "Your advice is worth thought, sir — Vellix, I mean. I'll ponder it."

Refusing another drink with a headshake and smile, he stood up and straightened his clothes.

"I had hoped for a longer chat," Vellix said, not rising.

"I've business to attend," Fafhrd answered. "My hearty thanks."

Vellix smiled thoughtfully as he departed.

The concourse of trodden snow winding amongst the trader's tents was racketty with noise and crowdedly a-bustle. While Fafhrd slept, the men of the Ice Tribe and fully half of the Frost Companions had come in and now many of these were gathered around two sunfires — so called for their bigness, heat, and the height of their leaping flames — quaffing steaming mead and laughing and scuffling together. To either side were oases of buying and bargaining, encroached on by the merrymakers or given careful berth according to the rank of those involved in

the business doings. Old comrades spotted one another and shouted and sometimes drove through the press to embrace. Food and drink were spilled, challenges made and accepted, or more often laughed down. Skalds sang and roared.

The tumult irked Fafhrd, who wanted quiet in which to disentangle Vellix from Nalgron in his feelings, and banish his vague doubts of Vlana, and unsmirch civilization. He walked as a troubled dreamer, frowning yet unmindful of elbowings and other shoves.

Then all at once he was tinglingly alert, for he glimpsed angling towards him through the crowd Hor and Harrax, and he read the purpose in their eyes. Letting an eddy in the crush spin him around, he noted Hrey, one other of Hringorl's creatures, close behind him.

The purpose of the three was clear. Under guise of comradely scuffling, they would give him a vicious beating or worse.

In his moody concern with Vellix, he had forgotten his more certain enemy and rival, the brutally direct yet cunning Hringorl.

Then the three were upon him. In a frozen instant he noted that Hor bore a small bludgeon and that Harrax's fists were overly large, as if they gripped stone or metal to heavy their blows.

He lunged backward, as if he meant to dodge between that couple and Hrey, then as suddenly reversed course and with a shocking bellow raced toward the sunfire ahead. Heads turned at his yell and a startled few dodged from his way. But the Ice Tribesmen and Frost Companions had time to take in what was happening: a tall youth pursued by three huskies. This promised sport. They sprang to either side of the sunfire to block his passage past it. Fafhrd veered

first to left, then to right. Jeering, they bunched more closely.

Holding his breath and throwing up an arm to guard his eyes, Fafhrd leaped straight through the flames. They lifted his fur cloak from his back and blew it high. He felt the stab of heat on hand and neck.

He came out with his furs a-smolder, blue flames running up his hair. There was more crowd ahead except for a swept, carpeted, and canopied space between two tents, where chiefs and priests sat intently around a low table where a merchant weighed gold dust in a pair of scales.

He heard bump and yell behind, someone cried, "Run, coward," another, "A fight, a fight," he saw Mara's face ahead, red and excited.

Then the future chief paramount of Northland — for so he happened at that instant to think of himself — half sprang, half dived aflame across the canopied table, unavoidably tumbling the merchant and two chiefs, banging aside the scales, and knocking the gold dust to the winds before he landed with a steaming zizzle in the great, soft snowbank beyond.

He swiftly rolled over twice to make sure all his fires were quenched, then scrambled to his feet and ran like a deer into the woods, followed by gusts of curses and gales of laughter.

Fifty big trees later he stopped abruptly in the snowy gloom and held his breath while he listened. Through the soft pounding of his blood, there came not the faintest sound of pursuit. Ruefully he combed with his fingers his stinking, diminished hair and sketchily brushed his now patchy, equally fire-stinking furs.

Then he waited for his breath to quiet and his awareness to expand. It was

during this pause that he made a disconcerting discovery. For the first time in his life the forest, which had always been his retreat, his continent-spanning tent, his great private needle-roofed room, seemed hostile to him, as if the very trees and the cold-fleshed, warm-bowled mother-earth in which they were rooted knew of his apostasy, his spurning, jilting and intended divorce of his native land.

It was not the unusual silence, nor the sinister and suspicious quality of the faint sounds he at last began to hear: scratch on bark of small claw, pitter of tiny paw-steps, hoot of a distant owl anticipating night. Those were effects, or at most concomitants. It was something unnamable, intangible, yet profound, like the frown of a god. Or goddess.

He was greatly depressed. At the same time he had never known his heart feel as hard.

When at last he set out again, it was as silently as might be, and not with his unusual relaxed and wide-open awareness, but rather the naked-nerved sensitivity and bent-bow readiness of a scout in enemy territory.

And it was well for him that he did so, since otherwise he might not have dodged the nearly soundless fall of an icicle sharp, heavy, and long as a siege-catapult's missile, nor the down-clubbing of a huge snow-weighted dead branch that broke with a single thunderous crack, nor the venomous dart of a snow-adder's head from its unaccustomed white coil in the open, nor the sidewise slash of the narrow, cruel claws of a snow-leopard that seemed almost to materialize a-spring in the frigid air and that vanished as strangely when Fafhrd slipped aside from its first attack and faced it with dirk drawn. Nor might he have spotted in time the up-whipping,

slip-knotted snare, set against all custom in this home-area of the forest and big enough to strangle not a hare but a bear.

He wondered where Mor was and what she might be muttering or chanting. Had his mistake been simply to dream of Nalgron? Despite yesterday's curse — and others before it — and last night's naked threats, he had never truly and wholly imagined his mother seeking to kill him. But now the hair on his neck was lifted in apprehension and horror, the watchful glare in his eyes was febrile and wild, while a little blood dripped unheeded from the cut in his cheek where the great icicle down-dropping had grazed it.

So intent had he become on spying dangers that it was with a little surprise that he found himself standing in the glade where he and Mara had embraced only yesterday, his feet on the short trail leading to the home tents. He relaxed a little then, sheathing his dirk and pressing a handful of snow to his bleeding cheek — but he relaxed only a little, with the result that he was aware of one coming to meet him before he consciously heard footsteps.

So silently and completely did he then melt into the snowy background that Mara was three paces away before she saw him.

"They hurt you," she exclaimed.

"No," he answered curtly, still intent on dangers in the forest.

"But the red snow on your cheek. There was a fight?"

"Only a nick got in the woods. I outran 'em."

Her look of concern faded. "First time I saw you run from a quarrel."

"I had no mind to take on three or more," he said flatly.

"Why do you look behind? They're

trailing you?"

"No."

Her expression hardened. "The elders are outraged. The younger men call you scareling. My brothers among them. I didn't know what to say."

"Your brothers!" Fafhrd exclaimed. "Let the stinking Snow Clan call me what they will. I care not."

Mara planted her fists on her hips. "You've grown very free with your insults of late. I'll not have my family berated, do you hear? Nor myself insulted, now that I think of it." She was breathing hard. "Last night you went back to that shriveled old whore of a dancer. You were in her tent for hours."

"I was not!" Fafhrd denied, thinking *an hour and a half at most*. The bickering was warming his blood and quelling his supernatural dread.

"You lie! The story's all around the camp. Any other girl would have set her brothers on you ere this."

Fafhrd came back to his scheme self almost with a jerk. On this eve of all eves he must not risk needless trouble — the chance of being crippled, it might even be, or dead.

Tactics, man, tactics, he told himself as he moved eagerly toward Mara, exclaiming in hurt, honeyed tones, "Mara my queen, how can you believe such of me, who love you more than—"

"Keep off me, liar and cheat!"

"And you carrying my son," he persisted, still trying to embrace her. "How does the bonny babe?"

"Spits at his father. Keep off me, I say."

"But I yearn to touch your ticklesome skin, than which there is no other balm for me this side of Hell, oh most beauteous made more beautiful by motherhood."

"Go to Hell, then. And stop these sickening pretenses. Your acting wouldn't deceive a drunken she-scullion. Hamfatter!"

Stung to his blood, which instantly grew hot, Fafhrd retorted, "And what of your own lies? Yesterday you boasted of how you'd cow and control my mother. Instantly you went sniveling to tell her you were with child by me."

"Only after I knew you lusted after the actress. And was it anything but the complete truth? Oh you twister!"

Fafhrd stood back and folded his arms. He pronounced, "Wife of mine must be true to me, must trust me, must ask me first before she acts, must comport herself like the mate of a chief paramount to be. It appears to me that in all of these you fall short."

"True to you? You're one to talk!" Her fair face grew unpleasantly red and strained with rage. "Chief paramount! Set your sights merely on being called a man by the Snow Clan, which they've not done yet. Hear me now, sneak and dissembler. You will instantly plead for my pardon on your knees and then come with me to ask my mother and aunts for my hand, or else—"

"I'd sooner kneel to a snake! Or wed a she-bear!" Fafhrd cried out, all thoughts of tactics vanished.

"I'll set my brothers on you," she screamed back. "Cowardly boor!"

Fafhrd lifted his fist, dropped it, set his hands to his head and rocked it in a gesture of namical desperation, then suddenly ran past her toward the camp.

"I'll set the whole tribe on you! I'll tell it in the Tent of the Women. I'll tell your mother..." Mara shrieked after him, her voice fading fast with the intervening boughs, snow, and distance.

Barely pausing to note that none were

abroad amongst the Snow Clan's tents, either because they were still at the trading fair or inside preparing supper, Fafhrd bounded up his treasure tree and flipped open the door of his hidey hole. Cursing the fingernail he broke doing so, he got out the sealskin-wrapped bow and arrows and rockets and added thereto his best pair of skis and ski sticks, a somewhat shorter package holding his father's second-best sword well-oiled, and a pouch of smaller gear. Dropping to the snow, he swiftly bound the longer items into a single pack, which he slung over shoulder.

After a moment of indecision, he hurtled inside Mor's tent, snatching from his pouch a small fire-pot of bubblestone, and filled it with glowing embers from the hearth, sprinkled ashes over them, laced the pot tight shut, and returned it to his pouch.

Then turning in frantic haste toward the doorway, he stopped dead. Mor stood in it, a tall silhouette white-edged and shadow-faced.

"So you're deserting me and the Waste. Not to return. You think."

Fafhrd was speechless.

"Yet you will return. If you wish it to be a-crawl on four feet, or blessedly on two, and not stretched lifeless on a litter of spears, weigh soon your duties and your birth."

Fafhrd framed a bitter answer, but the very words were a gag in his gullet. He stalked toward Mor.

"Make way, Mother," he managed in a whisper.

She did not move.

His jaws clamped in a horrid grimace of tension, he shot forth his hands, gripped her under the armpits — his flesh crawling — and set her to one side. She seemed as stiff and cold as ice. She made

no protest. He could not look her in the face.

Outside, he started at a brisk pace for Godshall, but there were men in his way — four hulking young blond ones flanked by a dozen others.

Mara had brought not only her brothers from the fair, but all her available kinsmen.

Yet now she appeared to have repented of her act, for she was dragging at her eldest brother's arm and talking earnestly to him, to judge by her expression and the movements of her lips.

Her eldest brother marched on as if she weren't there. And now as his gaze hit Fafhrd he gave a joyous shout, jerked from her grasp, and came on a-rush followed by the rest. All waved clubs or their scabbarded swords.

Mara's agonized, "Fly, my love!" was anticipated by Fafhrd by at least two heartbeats. He turned and raced for the woods, his long, stiff pack banging his back. When the path of his flight joined the trail of footprints he'd made running out of the woods, he took care to set a foot in each without slackening speed.

Behind him they cried, "Coward!" He ran faster.

When he reached the juttings of granite a short way inside the forest, he turned sharply to the right and leaping from bare rock to rock, making not one additional print, he reached a low cliff of granite and mounted it with only two hand-grabs, then darted on until the cliff's edge hid him from anyone below.

He heard the pursuit enter the woods, angry cries as in veering around trees they bumped each other, then a masterful voice crying for silence.

He carefully lobbed three stones so that they fell along his false trail well ahead of Mara's human hounds. The thud of the

stones and the rustle of branches they made falling drew cries of "There he goes!" and another demand for silence.

Lifting a larger rock, he hurled it two-handed so that it struck solidly the trunk of a stout tree on the nearer side of the trail, jarring down great branchfuls of snow and ice. There were muffled cries of startlement, confusion, and rage from the showered and likely three-quarters buried men. Fafhrd grinned, then his face sobered and his eyes grew dartingly watchful as he set off at a lope through the darkening woods.

But this time he felt no inimical presences and the living and the lifeless, whether rock or ghost, held off their assaults. Perhaps Mor, deeming him sufficiently harried by Mara's kinsmen, had ceased to energize her charms. Or perhaps— Fafhrd left off thinking and devoted all of himself to silent speeding. Vlana and civilization lay ahead. His mother and barbarism behind — but he endeavored not to think of her.

Night was near when Fafhrd left the woods. He had made the fullest possible circuit through them, coming out next to the drop into Trollstep Canyon. The strap of his long pack chafed his shoulder.

There were the lights and sounds of feasting amongst the traders' tents. Godshall and the actors' tents were dark. Still nearer, loomed the dark bulk of the stable tent.

He silently crossed the frosty, rutted gravel of the New Road leading south into the canyon.

Then he saw that the stable tent was not altogether dark. A ghostly glow moved inside it. He approached its door cautiously and saw the silhouette of Hor peering in. Still the soul of silence, he came up behind Hor and peered over his

shoulder.

Vlana and Vellix were harnessing the latter's two horses to Essedinex' sleigh, from which Fafhrd had stolen the three rockets.

Hor tipped up his head and lifted a hand to his lips to make some sort of owl or wolf cry.

Fafhrd whipped out his knife and as he was about to slash Hor's throat, reversed his intent and his knife too, and struck him senseless with a blow of the pommel against the side of his head. As Hor collapsed, Fafhrd hauled him to one side of the doorway.

Vlana and Vellix sprang into the sleigh, the latter touched his horses with the reins, and they came thud-slithering out. Fafhrd gripped his knife fiercely ... then sheathed it and shrank back into the shadows.

The sleigh went gliding off down the New Road. Fafhrd stared after it, standing tall, his arms as straight down his sides as those of a corpse laid out, but with his fingers and thumbs gripped into tightest fists.

He suddenly turned and fled toward Godshall.

There came an owl-hooting from behind the stable tent. Fafhrd skidded to a stop in the snow and turned round, his hands still fists.

Out of the dark, two forms, one trailing fire, raced toward Trollstep Canyon. The tall form was unmistakably Hringorl's. They stopped at the brink. Hringorl swung his torch in a great circle of flame. The light showed the face of Harrax beside him. Once, twice, thrice, as if in signal to someone far south down the canyon. Then they raced for the stable.

Fafhrd ran for Godshall. There was a harsh cry behind him. He stopped and turned again. Out of the stable galloped a

big horse. Hringorl rode it. He dragged by rope a man on skis: Harrax. The pair careened down the New Road in a flaring upswirl of snow.

Fafhrd raced on until he was past Godshall and a quarter way up the slope leading to the Tent of the Women. He cast off his pack, opened it, drew his skis from it and strapped them to his feet. Next he unwrapped his father's sword and belted it to his left side, balancing his pouch on right.

Then he faced Trollstep Canyon where the Old Road had gone. He took up two of his ski sticks, crouched, and dug them in. His face was a skull, the visage of one who casts dice with Death.

At that instant, beyond Godshall, the way he had come, there was a tiny yellow sputtering. He paused for it — counting heartbeats, he knew not why.

Nine, ten, eleven — there was a great flare of flame. The rocket rose, signalling tonight's show. Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three — the tail-flame faded and the nine white stars burst out.

Fafhrd dropped his ski sticks, picked up one of the three rockets he'd stolen, and drew its fuse from its end, pulling just hard enough to break the cementing tar without breaking the fuse.

Holding the slender, finger-long, tarry cylinder delicately between his teeth, he took his fire-pot out of his pouch. The bubblestone was barely warm. He unlaced the top and brushed away the ashes below until he saw — and was stung by — a red glow.

He took the fuse from between his teeth and placed it so that one end leaned on the edge of the fire-pot while the other end touched the red glow. There was a sputtering. Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve — and the sputtering became a flaring jet, then was done.

Setting his fire-pot on the snow, he took up the two remaining rockets, and hugged their thick bodies under his arms and dug their tails into the snow, testing them against the ground. The tails were truly as stiff and strong as ski sticks.

He held the rockets propped parallel in one hand and blew hard on the glowing-fire-patch in his fire-pot and brought it up toward the two fuses.

Mara ran out of the dark and said, "Darling, I'm so glad my kin didn't catch you!"

The glow of the fire-pot showed the beauty of her face.

Staring at her across it, Fafhrd said, "I'm leaving Cold Corner. I'm leaving the Snow Tribe. I'm leaving you."

Mara said, "You can't."

Fafhrd set down the fire-pot and the rockets.

Mara stretched out her hands.

Fafhrd took the silver bracelets off his wrists and put them in Mara's palms.

Mara clenched them and cried, "I don't ask for these. I don't ask for anything. You're the father of my child. You're mine!"

Fafhrd whipped the heavy silver chain off his neck, laid it across her wrists, and said, "Yes! You're mine forever, and I'm yours. Your son is mine. I'll never have another Snow-Clan wife. We're married."

Meanwhile he had taken up the two rockets again and held their fuses to the fire-pot. They sputtered simultaneously. He set them down, thonged shut the fire-pot and thrust it in his pouch. Three, four ...

Mor looked over Mara's shoulder and said, "I witness your words, my son. Stop!"

Fafhrd grabbed up the rockets, each by its sputtering body, dug in the stick ends and took off down the slope with a great

shove. Six, seven ...

Mara screamed, "Fafhrd! Husband!" as Mor shouted, "No son of mine!"

Fafhrd shoved again with the sputtering rockets. Cold air whipped his face. He barely felt it. The moonlit lip of the jump was close ahead. He felt its up-curve. Beyond it, darkness. Eight, nine...

He hugged the rockets fiercely to his sides, under his elbows, and was flying through darkness. Eleven, twelve...

The rockets did not fire. The moonlight showed the opposite wall of the canyon rushing toward him. His skis were directed at a point just beneath its top and that point was steadily falling. He tilted the rockets down and hugged them more fiercely still.

They fired. It was as if he were clinging to two great wrists that were dragging him up. His elbows and sides were warm. In the sudden glare the rock wall showed close, but now below. Sixteen, seventeen...

He touched down smoothly on the fair crust of snow covering the Old Road and hurled the rockets to either side. There was a double thunderclap and white stars were shooting around him. One smote and stung, then tortured his cheek as it died. There was time for the one great laughing thought, *I depart in a burst of glory*.

Then no time for large thoughts at all, as he gave all his attention to skiing down the steep slope of the Old Road, now bright in the moonlight, now pitch-black as it curved, crags to his right, a precipice to his left. Crouching and keeping his skis locked side to side, he steered by swaying his hips. His face and his hands grew numb. Reality was the Old Road hurled at him. Tiny bumps became great jolts. White rims came close. Black shoulders threatened.

Deep, deep down there were nevertheless thoughts. Even as he strained to keep all his attention on his skiing, they were there. *Idiot, you should have grabbed a pair of sticks with the rockets. But how would you have held them when casting aside the rockets? In your pack? — then they'd be doing you no good now. Will the fire-pot in your pouch prove more worthwhile than sticks? You should have stayed with Mara. Such loveliness you'll never see again. But it's Vlna you want. Or is it? How, with Vellix? If you weren't so cold-hearted and good, you'd have killed Vellix in the stable, instead of speeding to— Did you truly intend killing yourself? What do you intend now? Can Mor's charms outspeed your skiing? Were the rocket wrists really Nalgron's, reaching from Hell? What's that ahead?*

That was a hulking shoulder skidded around. He lay over on his right side as the white edge to his left narrowed. The edge held. Beyond it, on the opposite wall of the widening canyon, he saw a tiny streak of flame. Hringorl still had his torch, as he galloped down the New Road dragging Harrax. Fafhrd lay over again to his right as the Old Road curved farther that way in a tightening turn. The sky reeled. Life demanded that he lay still farther over, breaking to a stop. But Death was still an equal player in this game. Ahead was the intersection where Old and New Road met. He must reach it as soon as Vellix and Vlna in their sleigh. Speed was the essence. Why? He was uncertain. New curves ahead.

By infinitesimal stages the slope grew less. Snow-freighted treetops thrust from the sinister depths — to the left — then shot up to either side. He was in a flat black tunnel. His progress became soundless as a ghost's. He coasted to a

stop just at at the tunnel's end. His numbfingers went up and feather-touched the bulge of the star-born blister on his cheek. Ice needles crackled very faintly inside the blister.

No other sound but the faint tinkle of the crystals growing all around in the still, damp air.

Five paces ahead of him, down a sudden slope, was a bulbous roll bush weighted with snow. Behind it crouched Hringorl's chief lieutenant Hrey — no mistaking that pointed beard, though its red was gray in the moonlight. He held a strung bow in his left hand.

Beyond him, two dozen paces down slope, was the fork where New and Old Road met. The tunnel going south through the trees was blocked by a pair of roll-bushes higher than a man's head. Vellix' and Vlna's sleigh was stopped short of the pile, its two horses great loomings. Moonlight struck silvery manes and silvery bushes. Vlna sat hunched in the sleigh, her head fur-hooded. Vellix had got down and was casting the roll-bushes out of the way.

Torchlight came streaking down the New Road from Cold Corner. Vellix gave up his work and drew his sword. Vlna looked over her shoulder.

Hringorl galloped into the clearing with a laughing cry of triumph, and threw his torch high in the air, reined his horse to a stop behind the sleigh. The skier he towed—Harrax—shot past him and halfway up the slope. There Harrax braked to a stop and stooped to unlace his skis. The torch came down and went out sizzling.

Hringorl dropped from his horse, a fighting axe ready in his right hand.

Vellix ran toward Hringorl. Clearly he understood that he must dispose of the giant pirate before Harrax got off his skis

and he would be fighting two at once. Vlna's face was a small white mask in the moonlight as she half lifted from her seat to stare after him. The hood fell back from her head.

Fafhrd could have helped Vellix, but he still hadn't made a move to unlash his skis. With a pang—or was it relief?—he remembered he'd left his bow and arrows behind. He told himself that he should help Vellix. Hadn't he skied down here at incalculable risk to save the Venturer and Vlna, or at least warn them of the ambush he had suspected ever since he'd seen Hringorl whirl his torch on the precipice's edge? And didn't Vellix look like Nalgron, now more than ever in his moment of bravery? But the phantom Death still stood at Fafhrd's side, inhibiting all action.

Besides, Fafhrd felt there was a spell on the clearing, making all acting inside it futile. As if a giant spider, white-furred, had already spun a web around it, shutting it off from the rest of the universe, making it a volume inscribed "This space belongs to the White Spider of Death." No matter that this giant spider spun not silk, but crystals—the result was the same.

Hringorl aimed a great axe swipe at Vellix. The Venturer evaded it and thrust his sword into Hringorl's forearm. With a howl of rage, Hringorl shifted his axe to his left hand, lunged forward and struck again.

Taken by surprise, Vellix barely dodged back out of the way of the hissing curve of steel, bright in the moonlight. Yet he was nimbly on guard again, while Hringorl advanced more warily, axe-head high and a little ahead of him, ready to make short chops.

Vlna stood up in the sleigh, steel flashing in her hand. She made as if to

hurl it, then paused uncertainly.

Hrey rose from his bush, an arrow nocked to his bow.

Fafhrd could have killed him, by hurling his sword spearwise if in no other way. But the sense of Death beside him was still paralyzingly strong, and the sense of being in the White Ice Spider's great womblike trap. Besides, what did he really feel toward Vellix, or even Nalgron?

The bowstring twanged. Vellix paused in his fencing, transfixed. The arrow had struck him in the back, to one side of his spine, and protruded from his chest, just below the breastbone.

With a chop of the axe, Hringorl knocked the sword from the dying man's grip as he started to fall. He gave another of his great, harsh laughs. He turned toward the sleigh.

Vlana screamed.

Before he quite realized it, Fafhrd had silently drawn his sword from its well-oiled sheath, and using it as a stick pushed off down the white slope. His skis sang very faintly, though very high-pitched, against the snow crust.

Death no longer stood at his side. Death had stepped inside him. It was Death's feet that were lashed to the skis. It was Death who felt the White Spider's trap to be home.

Hrey turned, just in convenient time for Fafhrd's blade to open the side of his neck in a deep, slicing thrust that slit gullet as well as jugular. His sword came away almost before the gushing blood, black in the moonlight, had wet it, and certainly before Hrey had lifted his great hands in a futile effort to stop the great choking flow. It all happened very easily. His skis had thrust, Fafhrd told himself, not he. His skis, that had their own life, Death's life, and were carrying him on a most doomful journey.

Harrax, too, as if a very puppet of the gods, finished unlacing his skis and rose and turned just in time for Fafhrd's thrust, made upward from a crouch, to take him high in the guts, just as his arrow had taken Vellix, but in reverse direction.

The sword grated against Harrax's spine, but came out easily. Fafhrd sped downhill with hardly a check. Harrax stared wide-eyed after him. The great brute's mouth was wide open, too, but no sound came from it. Likely the thrust had sliced a lung and his heart as well, or else some of the great vessels springing from it.

And now Fafhrd's sword was pointed straight at the back of Hringorl, who was preparing to mount into the sleigh, and the skis were speeding the bloody blade faster and faster.

Vlana stared at Fafhrd over Hringorl's shoulder, as if she were looking at the approach of Death himself, and she screamed.

Hringorl swung around and instantly raised his axe to strike Fafhrd's sword aside. His wide face had the alert, yet sleepy look of one who had stared at Death many times and is never surprised by the sudden appearance of the Killer of All.

Fafhrd braked and turned, so that, his rush slowing, he went past the back end of the sleigh. His sword strained all the while toward Hringorl without quite reaching him. It evaded the chop Hringorl made at it.

Then Fafhrd saw, just ahead, the sprawled body of Vellix. He made a right-angle turn, braking instantly, even thrusting his sword into the snow so that it struck sparks from the rock below, to keep from tumbling over the corpse.

He wrenched his body around then, as

far as he could when his feet were still lashed to the skis, just in time to see Hringorl rushing down on him, out of the snow thrown up by the skis, and aiming his axe in a great blow at Fafhrd's neck.

Fafhrd parried the blow with his sword. Held at right angle to the sweep of the axe, the blade would have been shattered, but Fafhrd held his sword at just the proper angle for the axe to be deflected with a screech of steel and go whistling over his head.

Hringorl louted past him, unable to stop his rush.

Fafhrd again wrenched around his body, cursing the skis that now nailed his feet to the earth. His thrust was too late to reach Hringorl.

The thicker man turned and came rushing back, aiming another axe-swipe. This time the only way Fafhrd could dodge it was by falling flat on the ground.

He glimpsed two streakings of moonlit steel. Then he used his sword to thrust himself to his feet, ready for another blow at Hringorl, or another dodge, if there were time.

The big man had dropped his axe and was clawing at his own face.

Lunging by making a clumsy sidewise step with his ski—no place this for style!—Fafhrd ran him through the heart.

Hringorl dropped his hands as his body pitched over backwards. From his right eye-socket protruded the silver pommel and black grip of a dagger. Fafhrd wrenched out his sword. Hringorl hit with a great soft thud and an out-blow of snow around him, writhed violently twice, and was still.

Fafhrd poised his sword and his gaze darted around. He was ready for any other attack, by anyone at all.

But not one of the five bodies moved—the two at his feet, the two

sprawled on the slope, nor Vlana's erect in the sleigh. While with a little surprise he realized that the gasping he heard was his own breath. Otherwise the only sound was a faint, high tinkling, which for the present he ignored. Even Vellix' two horses hitched to the sleigh and Hringorl's big mount standing a short way up the Old Road, were unaccountably silent.

He leaned back against the sleigh, resting his left arm on the icy tarpaulin covering the rockets and other gear. His right hand still held his sword poised, a little negligently now, but ready.

He inspected the bodies once more, ending at Vlana's. Still none of them had moved. Each of the first four was surrounded by its blotches of blood-blackened snow, huge for Hrey, Harrax, and Hringorl, tiny for the arrow-slain Vellix.

He fixed his gaze on Vlana's staring, white-rimmed eyes. Controlling his breath, he said, "I owe you thanks for slaying Hringorl. Perhaps. I doubt I could have bested him, he on his feet, I on my back. But was your knife aimed at Hringorl, or at my back? And did I 'scape death simply by falling, while the knife passed over me to strike down another man?"

She answered not a word. Instead her hands flew up to press her cheeks and lips. She continued to stare, now over her fingers, at Fafhrd.

He continued, his voice growing still more casual, "You chose Vellix over me, after making me a promise. Why not Hringorl then over Vellix—and over me—when Hringorl seemed the likelier man to win? Why didn't you help Vellix with your knife, when he so bravely tackled Hringorl? Why did you scream when you saw me, spoiling my chance to

kill Hringorl with one silent thrust?"

He emphasized each question by idly poking his sword in her direction. His breath was coming easily now, weariness departing from his body even as black depression filled his mind.

Vlana slowly took her hands from her lips and swallowed twice. Then she said, her voice harsh, but clear, and not very loud, "A woman must always keep all ways open, can you understand that? Only by being ready to league with any man, and discard one for another as fortune shifts the plan, can she begin to counter men's great advantage. I chose Vellix over you because his experience was greater and because—believe this or not, as you will—I did not think a partner of mine would have much chance for long life and I wanted you to live. I did not help Vellix here at the roadblock because I thought then that he and I were doomed. The roadblock and from it the knowledge that there must be ambushers around cowed me—though Vellix seemed not to think so, or to care. As for my screaming when I saw you, I did not recognize you. I thought you were Death himself."

"Well, it appears I was," Fafhrd commented softly, looking around for a third time at the scattered corpses. He unlashed his skis. Then, after stamping his feet, he knelt by Hringorl and jerked the dagger from his eye and wiped it on the dead man's furs.

Vlana continued, "And I fear death even more than I detested Hringorl. Yes, I would eagerly flee with Hringorl, if it were away from death."

"This time Hringorl was headed in the wrong direction," Fafhrd commented, hefting the dagger. It balanced well for thrusting or throwing.

Vlana said, "Now of course I'm yours. Eagerly and happily—again believe it or

not. If you'll have me. Perhaps you still think I tried to kill you."

Fafhrd turned toward her and tossed the dagger. "Catch," he said. She caught.

He laughed and said, "No, a showgirl who's also been a thief would be apt to be expert at knife-throwing. And I doubt that Hringorl was struck in his brains through his eye by accident. Are you still minded to have revenge on the Thieves Guild?"

"I am," she answered.

Fafhrd said, "Women are horrible. I mean, quite as horrible as men. Oh, is there anyone in the wide world that has aught but ice water in his or her veins?"

And he laughed again, more loudly, as if knowing there could be no answer to that question. Then he wiped his sword on Hringorl's furs, thrust it in his scabbard, and without looking at Vlana strode past her and the silent horses to the pile of roll-bushes and began to cast their remainder aside. They were frozen to each other and he had to tug and twist to get them loose, putting more effort into it, fighting the bushes more than he recalled Vellix having to do.

Vlana did not look at him, even as he passed. She was gazing straight up the slope with its sinuous ski track leading to the black tunnel-mouth of the Old Road. Her white gaze was not fixed on Harrax and Hrey, nor on the tunnel mouth. It went higher.

There was a faint tinkling that never stopped.

Then there was a crystal clatter and Fafhrd wrenched loose and hurled aside the last of the ice-weighted roll-bushes.

He looked down the road leading south. To civilization, whatever that was worth now.

This road was a tunnel, too, between snow-shouldered pines.

And it was filled, the moonlight showed, with a web of crystals that seemed to go on forever, strands of ice stretching from twig to twig and bough to bough, depth beyond icy depth.

Fafhrd recalled his mother's words, *There is a witchy cold that can follow you anywhere in Nehwon. Wherever ice once went, witchery can send it again. Your father now bitterly regrets...*

He thought of a great white spider, spinning its frigid way around this clearing.

He saw Mor's face, beside Mara's, atop the precipice, the other side of the great leap.

He wondered what was being chanted now in the Tent of the Women, and if Mara were chanting too. Somehow he thought not.

Vlana cried out softly, "Women indeed are horrible. Look. Look. Look!"

At that instant, Hringorl's horse gave a great whinny. There was the pound of hoofs as he fled up the Old Road.

An instant later, Vellix' horses reared and screamed.

Fafhrd smote the neck of the nearest horse with the outside of his arm. Then he looked toward the small, big-eyed, triangular white mask of Vlana's face and followed her gaze.

Growing up out of the slope that led to the Old Road were a half dozen tenuous forms high as trees. They looked like hooded women. They became more and more solid as Fafhrd watched.

He crouched down in terror. This movement caught his pouch between his belly and his thigh. He felt a faint warmth.

He sprang up and dashed back the way he had come. He ripped the tarpaulin off the back of the sleigh. He grabbed the eight remaining rockets one by one and

thrust the tail of each into the snow so that their heads pointed at the vast, thickening ice-figures.

Then he reached in his pouch, took out his fire-pot, unthonged its top, shook off its gray ashes, shook its red ashes to one side of the bowl, and rapidly touched them to the fuses of the rockets.

Their multiple spluttering in his ears, he sprang into the sleigh.

Vlana did not move as he brushed her. But she chinked. She seemed to have put on a translucent cloak of ice crystals that held her where she stood. Reflected moonlight shone stolidly from the crystals. He felt it would move only as the moon moved.

He grabbed the reins. They stung his fingers like frozen iron. He could not stir them. The ice web ahead had grown around the horses. They were part of it — great equine statues enclosed in a greater crystal. One stood on four legs, one reared on two. The walls of the ice womb were closing in. *There is a witchy cold that can follow you...*

The first rocket roared, then the second. He felt their warmth. He heard the mighty tinkling as they struck their up-slope targets.

The reins moved, slapped the backs of the horses. There was a glassy smashing as they plunged forward. He ducked his head and holding the reins in his left hand, swung up his right and dragged Vlana down into the seat. Her ice-cloak jingled madly and vanished. Four, five...

There was a continuous jangling as horses and sleigh shot forward through the ice web. Crystals showered onto and glanced off his ducked head. The jangling grew fainter. Seven, eight...

All icy constraints fell away. Hoofs pounded. A great north wind sprang up, ending the calm of day. Ahead the sky

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 102)

THE WAGER LOST BY WINNING JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by MICHAEL KALUTA

John Brunner's strange Traveller in Black—he has many names, but a single nature—first appeared in the British SCIENCE FANTASY, with "Imprint of Chaos." His second appearance was in that magazine's successor, IMPULSE, with "Break The Door of Hell." Now that his original home (under either name) is dead, the Traveller has made his way here in what we hope will be only his first appearance in these pages, once again to do battle with the forces of Chaos, in this case the gamblers of Teq . . .

DOWN THE SLOPES of a pleasant vale an army marched in good order: colours at the head fluttering on the warm summer breeze, drummers beating a lively stroke for the men behind perspiring in their brass-plated cuirasses and high thonged boots. Each man except the officers wore a baldric with an axe and a knife in leather frogs, and carried a spear and a wide square shield. The officers rode horses draped with fine light mail, wore shirts and breeches of velvet sewn with little steel plates, and carried straight swords in decorated sheaths, the pommels bright with enamel and gilt.

Leaning on his staff of curdled light, the traveller in black stood in the shade of a chestnut tree and contemplated them as they went by. Directly he clapped eyes on them, the banners had told him whence they hailed; no city but Teq employed those three special hues in its flag—gold, and silver, and the red of new-spilled blood. They symbolized the moral of a legend which the traveller knew well, and held barbarous, to the effect that all

treasure must be bought by expending life.

In accordance with that precept, the Lords of Teq before they inherited their fathers' estates must kill all challengers and did so by any means to hand, whether cleanly by the sword or subtly by drugs and venoms. Consequently some persons had come to rule in Teq who were less than fit—great only in their commitment to evil.

"That," said the traveller to the leaves on the chestnut tree, "is a highly disturbing spectacle!"

However, he stood as and where he was, neither hidden nor conspicuous, and as ever allowed events to follow their natural course. Few of the rank-and-file soldiery noticed him as they strode along, being preoccupied with the warmth of the day and the weight of their equipment, but two or three of the officers gave him curious glances. However, they paid no special attention to the sight of an old man in a black cloak, and likely, a mile or two beyond, would have dismissed him altogether from their minds.

That was customary and to be expected. Few folk recognized the traveller in black, unless they were enchanters of great skill and could detect the uniqueness of one who had many names yet but a single nature, or perhaps if they were learned in curious arts and aware of the significance of the season: that epoch after the conjunction of four specific planets when, it was said, he to whom the task had been given of bringing forth order from chaos went out by ordinary roads to oversee that portion of the All which lay in his charge.

And this saying was true. Uncomplaining—for it was not in his nature to resent the inescapable—at this particular season the traveller did go forth to meet and talk with many, many people, and (for this too was in his single nature) to grant to those who craved such the fulfilment of their heart's desire.

The journeys he had made were far beyond counting. Most of them, anyhow, were indistinguishable—not because the same events transpired during each or all, but because in chaos they were so unlike as to be similar. Nonetheless, a little by a little earnestness were coming of his eventual triumph. Not only could he recall that here beneath a hill lay prisoned Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes, or there in a volcano Fegrim was pent; now there had been a change in his habits which he had not wished. Formerly he had been used to setting forth from, and returning to, the city Ryovora on his travels.

But Ryovora had passed into Time.

Soon, as the black-garbed traveller counted soonness, all things would have but one nature. He would be unique no more, and time would have a stop. Whereupon...

Release.

Watching the purposeful progress of



the army, the traveller considered the idea with a faint sense of surprise. It had never previously crossed his mind. But, clearly, it was a wise and kindly provision that his nature should include the capacity to become weary, so that, his mission over, he might surrender to oblivion with good grace.

The rearguard of the army passed, slow commissary-wagons drawn by mules bumping on the rough track. The drumbeats died in the distance, their last faint reverberation given back by the hillsides like the failing pulse of a giant's heart, and he stirred himself to continue on his way.

It was not until he came, much later, to Erminvale that he realized, weary or no, he must still contend with vastly subtle forces arrayed against him.

For a little while, indeed, he could almost convince himself that this was to be the last of his journeys, and that his next return would find the places he had known tight in the grip of Time. The borderland between rationality and chaos seemed to be shrinking apace, as the harsh constraint of reason settled on this corner of the All. Reason implies logic, logic requires memory, and memory Time, not the randomness existent in eternity.

Thus, beyond Leppersley, the folk remembered Farchgrind, and that being's chiefest attribute had once been that no one should recall his deceptions, but fall prey to them again and again. Where once there had been a monstrous pile of follies, each a memento to some new-minted prank—"Build thus and worship me and I will give you more wealth than you can carry!" or "Build thus and worship me and I will give you health and vigour like a man of twenty!"—there were sober

families in small neat timber houses, framed with beams pilfered from the ancient temples, who said, "Yes, we hear Farchgrind when he speaks to us, but we think what became of Grandfather when he believed what he was told, and carry on about our daily business."

The traveller spoke to Farchgrind almost in sorrow, saying it was not his doing that had made men so sceptical, but had to suffer without denial the expected retort.

"You too," said the elemental, "are part of the way things are, and I—I am only part of the way things were!"

Moreover at Acromel, the place where honey was bitter, that tall black tower like a pillar of onyx crowned with agate where once the dukes had made sacrifice to the Quadruple God was broken off short, snapped like a dry stick. In among the ruins fools made ineffectual attempts to revive a dying cult, but their folly was footling compared to the grand insanities of the enchanter Manuus who once had taken a hand in the affairs of this city, or even of the petty tyrant Vengis, whose laziness and greed almost brought a fearful calamity on the innocent citizens of Ys.

"Ah, if only I could find the key to this mystery!" said one of them, who had bidden the traveller to share the warmth of a fire fed with leather-bound manuscripts from the ducal library. "Then should I have men come to me and bow the knee, offer fine robes to bar the cold instead of these shabby rags, savoury dishes to grace my table instead of this spitted rat I'm toasting on a twig, and nubile virgins from the grandest families to pleasure me, instead of that old hag I was stupid enough to take to wife!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and knocked his staff on the

altar-stone the man was using as a hearth.

In the cold dawn that followed, the wife went running to her neighbors to report a miracle: her husband was struck to a statue, unmoving yet undead. And, because no other such wonder had occurred since the departure of the Quadruple God, things transpired as he had wished. Men set him up on the stump of the great black tower and wrapped their best robes about him, burned expensive delicacies on a brazier that the scent might waft to his nostrils, and sought beautiful girls that their throats might be cut and their corpses hung before him on gallows hung with chains—all this in strict accordance with the ancient customs.

But after a while, when their adulation failed to bring them the favours that they begged, they forgot him and left him helpless to watch the robes fade and the fire die to ashes and the girls' bodies feed the maggots until nothing was left but their bare white bones.

Likewise, a packman met at Gander's Well spoke in the shade of brooding Yorbeth, whose tap-root fed his branches with marvellous sap from an underground spring, and said, "Each year when the snows melt I come back here and with the proper precautions contrive to pluck the fruit and leaves from these long boughs. Such growths no sun ever shone on before! See here: a furry ball that cries in a faint voice when my hand closes on it! And here too: a leaf transparent as glass that yet shows, when you peer through, a scene beyond that no man can swear to identifying! And these I take, and sell to wealthy strangers in cities far abroad.

"But what irks me"—and he leaned forward, grimacing—"is this simple

injustice. I make the trip to Gander's Well, risk death or worse to garner my wares, and tramp the hot dusty summer roads with a heavy pack on my shoulders, and then I must sell for a pittance to some amateur enchanter who doubtless botches the conjuration he plans to work with what I supplied... Would that I knew beyond a peradventure what can be wrought by using the means I'm making marketable!"

"As you wish," sighed the traveller, "so be it." He knocked three times with his staff on the coping of the well and went aside to speak of release to Yorbeth—that release which he himself was coming so unexpectedly to envy. For there was one way only to comprehend the possibilities of what grew on this tall tree, and that was to take Yorbeth's place within its trunk.

Where, trapped and furious, the packman shortly found himself, possessed of all the secret lore he had suspected down to the use that might be made of a sheet of the bark in conjuring Ogram-Vanvit from his lair, and powerless to exploit it for his gain.

Yorbeth himself ceased to be. Heavy-hearted, the traveller went on.

In Eyneran, a mountainous land where folk kept sheep and goats, he had once incarcerated a chilly elemental named Karth, thanks to whose small remaining power one strange valley stayed frozen beneath a mask of ice when all around the summer flowers grew bright and jangly music came from the bell-wethers of the grazing flocks. Here the traveller came upon a fellow who with flint and steel sought to ignite the ice, grim-visaged and half blue with cold.

"Why," inquired the traveller, "do you spend so long in this unprofitable

pastime?"

"Are you a simpleton like all the rest?" countered the man, frenziedly striking spark after spark. "Is it not in the nature of ice, by ordinary, to melt when the hot sun falls on it? Since what is in this valley does not melt, it cannot be ice. Certainly it is not stone—rock-crystal or quartz is wholly different from this. Therefore it must be of an ambery nature, and amber is congealed resin, and resin burns well, as any drudge knows who has lighted fires with pine-knots. Accordingly this so-called 'ice' must burn. Sooner or later," he concluded in a more dispirited tone, and wiped his brow. The gesture made a little crackling noise, for so bitter was the wind in this peculiar valley that the sweat of his exertion turned at once to a layer of verglas on his skin.

The traveller thought sadly of the scrivener Jacques of Ys, who also had been persuaded that he alone of all the world was perfectly right, and held back his opinion of the would-be ice-burner's logic. Fencing disagreement, though, the fellow gave him a sharp and hostile glare.

"I'm sick of being mocked by everyone!" he exclaimed. "Would that the true nature of this imagined ice could this moment become clear for you and all to see!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and knew that the time of release had come also to Karth. With the cessation of his dwindled ancient power, sunlight thawed the glaciers and warm zephyrs fathered water from their edge.

The man looked and touched, and paddled his hands in it, and cried out in dismay.

"If this is water, that must have been ice—but that was not ice, therefore this is not water!"

Spray lashed him; rivulets formed

around his ankles.

"It is not water," he declared, and stood his ground. But when the pent-up floods broke loose they swept him with his flint and steel far down the hillside and dashed him to death on a rock.

Alloof, the black-clad traveller stood on a rock and watched the whirling waters, thinking that he, so aged that there was not means to measure his duration, knew now what it meant to say, "I am old."

So too in Gryte, a fair city and a rich one, there was a lady who could have had her choice of fifty husbands, but kept her heart whole, as she claimed, for one man who would not look at her though he had wooed and conquered maidens for a hundred miles around.

"Why does he scorn me?" she cried. "He must be hunting for a wife who will give him surcease from this endless quest—can he not come to me who hunger for him?"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and next day the man she dreamed of came a-courting her, so that she imagined all her hopes fulfilled and made him free of her body and household. And the day after he treated her as he had treated all the rest: rose from the couch where he had taken his pleasure, without a kind look or a kiss, and left her to wring her hands and moan that she was undone.

Likewise there stood a gravestone in the cemetery of Barbizond, under the arch of rainbow signalling the presence of the bright being Sardhin which shed a gentle never-ceasing rain. The traveller visited it because he owed a particular private debt to the man beneath, a former merchant enchanter of Ryovora who had performed a service for him unknowingly, and full of years and honour had gone to his repose.

Turning away, the traveller was

addressed by a person in a cape of leaves who might have passed at a glance for seven years of age, either boy or girl.

"Good morrow, sir! Think you to brace yourself for death by contemplating it, or have you cause to wish it might overtake some other before yourself?"

"In that case, what?" the traveller said.

"Why, then I could be of service," the person said slyly. "I have been for thirty-one years as you see me now—dwarfed, sexless and agile. What better end could I turn such a gift to than to become the finest assassin ever known in Barbizond? You stand among testimonials to my skill; here a miserly old ruffian whose children paid me half his coffer-load, there an eldest son who blocked his brother's way to an inheritance—"

"You speak openly of it!"

"Why, sir, no one is to hear me save yourself, and would folk not think you deranged were you to say a child had boasted of such matters to you?"

"In truth, a childish form is a deep disguise," the traveller conceded. "But did you speak to me to solicit my custom, or more because that disguise is perfectly efficient?"

The person scowled. "Why, frankly, from time to time the very secrecy which benefits my trade does gall me. I gain my living, yes, but no one knows except those whom I have served that I'm the master above all masters. Would that I might enjoy the fame my brilliance deserves!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and struck his staff against the nearest tomb. That very evening rumours took their rise in Barbizond, and everyone who had lost a relative in suspicious circumstances, to a poison subtler than the enchanters could define, or a silent noose, or a knife hissing from the shadows, began to realise how well the

appearance of a child of tender years might mask a killer.

The traveller passed the body next morning, sprawled on a dung-heap by the road to Teq.

Will it be now? The question haunted the traveller as he went. With half his being he was apprehensive, for all he had ever known through innumerable eons was the task allotted him; with the balance, he yearned for it. Karth gone, Yorbeth gone—would there shortly also be an end for Tuprid, and Caschalanva, and Lapri van of the Yellow Eyes?

On impulse, when he came to the grove of ash-trees at Segrimond which was one of the places where such things were possible, he constrained Wolpec in the proper fashion to enter a candle, but when he tried to smoke a piece of glass over its flame and read the three truths that would appear on it, it cracked across. With resignation he concluded that this was not for him to learn, and went his way.

In Kanish-Kulya the wall that once had divided Kanishmen from Kulyamen, decked along its top with the skulls of those dead in a long-ago war, had crumbled until it was hardly more than a bank enshrouded with ivy and convolvulus, and roads pierced it along which went the gay carts of pedlars and the tall horses of adventure-seeking knights. Yet in the minds of men the barrier stood firm as ever.

"Not only," groused a certain Kanish merchant to the traveller, "does my eldest daughter decline to accept her fate and be sacrificed in traditional manner to Fegrim, pent in that volcano yonder—she adds insult to injury and proposes to wed a Kulyan brave!"

The traveller, who knew much about

the elemental called Fegrim, held his peace.

"This I pledge on my life!" the merchant fumed. "If my daughter carries on the way she's going, I shall never want to speak to her again, nor let her in my house!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller. From that moment forward the merchant uttered never another word; dumb, he stood by to watch the fine procession in which the girl went to claim her bridegroom, and before she returned home with him her father was dead, so that the house was no longer his.

But nothing in this was remarkable. Greed, hate, jealousy—they were commonplace, and it was not to be questioned that they should defeat themselves.

Onward again, therefore, and now at last to Erminvale.

In that land of pleasant rolling downs and copses of birch and maple, there stood the village Wantwich, of small white farms parted by tidy hedgerows, radiating out from a central green where of a summer evening the young people would gather with a fiddler and a harpist to dance and court in bright costumes of pheasants' feathers and fantastical jingling bangles. At one side of it was a pond of sweet water which the traveller in black had given into the charge of the being Horimos, for whom he had conceived a strange affection on discovering that this one alone among all known elementals was too lazy to be harmful, desiring chiefly to be left in peace. While others older than themselves danced, the village children would splash in the pond with delighted cries, or paint their bare bodies with streaks of red and blue clay from the

bank, proudly writing each other's names if they knew how. In winter, moreover, it served for them to skate, and well wrapped in the whole hides of goats they slid across on double wooden runners strapped to their soles.

Good things were plentiful in Erminvale: creamy milk, fat cheeses, turnips so firm and sweet you might carve a slice and eat it with a dressing of salt, berries and nuts of every description, and bearded barley for nutritious bread. Also they brewed good beer, and on a festival day they would wheel three barrels on to the green from which anyone, resident or traveller, might swig at will, the first mug always being poured, of course, to Horimos. Content with that small token of esteem, he slumbered at the bottom of his mud.

All this was what the girl named Viola had known since a child, and from reports she had heard through visitors she felt well satisfied. Where else was there that offered a better life? Great cities were crowded and full of smoke and stinks; moreover they had more demanding deities than Horimos, like Hnua-Threl of Barbizond who must be invoked with combats to the death before his altar, or that blind Lady Luck who smiled randomly on the folk of Teq and might tomorrow turn her back for good on one she favoured today.

She had heard of Teq from the finely clad rider who had come, a while ago, on a tall roan stallion, twirling long fair mustachios and spilling gold from his scrip like sand for all his complaints about the size of his room at Wantwich's only inn, and the inferiority of beer compared to the wines of his home city.

He had arrived on the first fine evening of spring, when Viola and her betrothed man Leluak joined all the other young

people in a giddy whirling dance across the green, and because he was a stranger and it was courteous—and also, she admitted to herself, because all the other girls would be impressed—she had accepted his request to join him in executing some new-fashionable steps from Teq. Instruction took a moment only; she was a skilful dancer, light on her slim legs that not even winter's dark had worn to paleness from their summer brown. After that they talked.

She learned his name was Achoreus, and that he served one of the great lords of Teq. She learned further that he thought her beautiful, which she granted, for everyone had always told her so; she had long sleek tresses, large liquid eyes like opals, and skin of satin smoothness. He declared further that such loveliness was wasted in a backwater hamlet and should be displayed to the nobility and gentry of a place like Teq. She thanked him but said she was already spoken for. Thereupon he demonstrated that for all his arrogant airs he lacked common civility, for he tried to fondle her inside her bodice, and she walked away.

Had he acted civilly, asking her to walk in the woods with him and find a bed of moss, she would have agreed, of course; it was the custom of Wantwich to receive all strangers as one would one's friends. But as things were—so she told Leluak when bidding him good night—he seemed to expect that the mere sight of him would make her forget the boy she had grown up with all her life, a foolishness which she could not abide.

Accordingly, all plans for her marriage went ahead in the ancient manner, until at sunset on ~~the~~ day before the festival her father, her mother, her two sisters and her aunt prepared her in the proper fashion for her night alone, in which she

must pass to the five high peaks enclosing Erminvale and there plant the prescribed seeds against the time of bearing children: an apple, a sloe, a cob, an acorn and a grain of barley.

With a leather wallet and a flask of water, carrying a torch of sweet-scented juniper, and followed by the cries of well-wishing from the assembled villagers who tomorrow would attend her wedding on the green, she set forth into the gathering dusk.

The tramp was a long one, and difficult in the dark, but she had wandered through Erminvale since she was old enough to be allowed out of her mother's sight, and though she must clamber up rocky slopes and thread her way through thickets where night-birds hooted and chattered, she gained each peak in turn with no worse injury than thorn-scratches on her calves. As dawn began to pale the sky, she set in place the final seed, the grain of barley, and watered it from her body to give it a healthy start in life. Then, singing, she turned back, weary but excited, on the road towards her home. By about noon she would be safe in Leluak's embrace, and the feasting and merry-making could begin.

Still a mile off, however, she began to sense that something was amiss. Smoke drifted to her on the breeze, but it lacked the rich scent of baking which she had expected. A little closer, and she started to wonder why there was no shrill music audible, for no one had ever been able to prevent Fiddler Jarge from striking up directly his instrument was tuned whether or no the bride had come back from the hills.

Worst of all, at the Meeting Rock that marked the last bend in the road, the huge granite slab at which the groom traditionally seized his bride by the hand

to lead her into Wantwiche, there was no sign of Leluak.

She broke into a run, terrified, and rounded the rock. Instantly she saw the furthest outhouse, that of the Remban family which she remembered seeing built when she was a toddler, and almost fainted with the shock. Its fine clean walls were smeared with a grime of smoke, its gate was broken and their finest plough-ox lay bellowing silent suffering through a bubble of blood.

Worse still beyond: the Harring house afire—source of the smoke she'd smelled! Her own home with its shutters ripped off the hinges, the front door battered down with an axe from the kindling pile! Leluak's, unmarked, but the door ajar and on the threshold a smear of hour-old blood!

Wildly she ran onward to the village green, and there was the worst of all—Jarge's fiddle broken on the ground, the beer-barrels set out for the wedding drained, a patch of scorched grass she could not account for near to them, and all the water of the pond fouled with the blood of the ducks which daily quacked there, joyously.

Crouched in her chair, from which for longer than Viola could recall she had watched and grinned at the countless weddings she had witnessed, sat the only remaining villager of Wantwiche: Granny Anderland, who was in fact a great-great-grandmother.

"What happened?" Viola shrieked at her. "What *happened*?"

But all that Granny could do—all that she had ever been able to do since Viola was a baby—was to expose her toothless grin and rock back and forth in her chair.

Helpless, Viola screamed Leluak's name a few times, but after that she collapsed on the ground from weariness

and horror, and that was how the traveller found her when he chanced that way.

He barely checked his pace as he came into Wantwiche, along another road than that which Viola had followed on her return from the five peaks. But his expression grew sterner with every stride he took until when finally he could survey the full measure of the calamity from the centre of the green his brow was dark as a thundercloud.

His footsteps were too soft upon the sward for the weeping girl to hear them through her sobs, and it was plain that the old woman had either been so shocked by what she'd seen that she had lost her reason, or else was long ago too senile to understand the world. Accordingly he addressed the girl.

At the sound of his voice she cringed away, her face wet with tears displaying mindless terror. But there was little in the sight of an old man leaning on a staff to suggest that he could be connected with the rape of Wantwiche. And, for all that he looked angry beyond description, there was no reason why that anger should be aimed at her.

"Who are you, child?" the traveller inquired.

"I—I'm Viola, sir," the girl forced out against her sobs.

"And what has happened here today?"

"I don't know, I don't know!" Wringing her hands, she rose. "Why should anyone want to do this to us? Monsters must have done it—evil beings!"

"There are few such creatures left hereabouts," the traveller said. "More likely it was men, if one can dignify them with that name. You were away from the village?"

"I was to be married today!" Viola choked.

"I see. Therefore you were walking the five peaks and planting seeds on them."

"You—you know our customs, sir?"
Viola was regaining control of herself, able to mop away her blinding tears and look at the newcomer. "Yet I don't remember that I saw you here before."

"This is not the first time that I've been to Wantwich," the traveller said, refraining from any reference to the number of earlier visits. "But to pursue the important matter: did not this old lady witness what occurred?"

"Granny Anderland has been like this for many years," Viola said dully. "She likes to be talked to, nods and sometimes giggles, but beyond that..." She gave a hopeless shrug.

"I see. In that case we must resort to other means to determine what went on. Girl, are you capable of being brave?"

"If you can do something, sir, to help me get back my man—and to right the wrong that's been done to all these good people—I'll be as brave as you require of me." She stared at him doubtfully. "But *can* you do anything?"

"You wish me to?"

"Sir, I beg you to!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, and took her hand, leading her across the green, past the patch of grass scorched black—at which he cast a puzzled glance—and to the very rim of the sweetwater pond.

"Stand firm," he commanded. "Do not be afraid of what you see."

"I—I don't understand..."

"Better for you that you should not," the traveller muttered, and thrust his staff into the water. He dissolved one of the forces binding the light of which it was composed, and a shaft of brilliance lanced downward to the bottom.

"Horimos!" he said. "Come forth!"

The girl's eyes grew round with wonder, and then her mouth also, with dismay, for the water heaved and bubbled sluggishly as pitch, and from the plopping explosions a thick voice seemed to take form, uttering words.

"Le-e-ave me-e a-a-lo-o-one..."

"Move!" rapped the traveller. "Stir yourself—you've slumbered for eons in that soft bed of mud! Shall I remove you to Kanish-Kulya, make you share the pit of a volcano with Febrim?"

A noise between a grumble and a scream.

"Yes, he'd be a restless companion for you, wouldn't he?" the traveller rasped. "Up! Up! I need to speak with you!"

Beside him, Viola had gone down on her knees, all colour vanished from her cheeks. Too petrified even to blink, she saw the water from which she had so often drunk, in which she had so often bathed, rise into tumult—yet absurdly slowly, as though time had been extended to double length. More bubbles burst, and she could watch their surface part; waves and ripples crossed the surface so slowly, one would have thought to push them aside into new directions without wetting one's palm.

And ultimately—

"You may prefer to close your eyes now," the traveller said didactically, and added, "Horimos! Speak! And be quick—the sooner you tell me what I need to know, the sooner you can sink back into your ooze. What's become of all the people from this village of yours?"

"Been taken away," Horimos mumbled. It was not exactly a mouth he used to shape the words, but then, like all elementals, his physical form was mostly accidental.

"How and by whom? Come on, tell me the whole story!" The traveller rapped

the bank impatiently with his staff.

"Army marched in this morning," Horimos sighed. "Went around the village, drove everyone to the green—most of them were there already anyway. Set up a forge there where the grass is blackened, welded fetters for everyone on to a chain. Killed some ducks and hens for supper, drank the beer in the barrels, herded everyone away. Good riddance, say I—never had a moment's peace since you put me here, what with fiddling and laughing and swimming and skating and all the rest of it!"

"Whose was the army? What colours did they fly?"

"Should I know who uses a flag of silver, red and gold?"

The traveller gave a thoughtful nod.

"But you made no attempt to interfere?"

"Told you—glad to see the back of them." Horimos made the whole surface of the pond yawn in a colossal expression of weariness. "And but for you I'd have enjoyed a decent sleep for a while, now I'm alone!"

"For that," said the traveller softly, "until the folk of Wantwich are again in their homes, you shall itch so much you can enjoy no rest. Begone with you. Hope that the matter is speedily set to rights."

"But—!"

"You argue with me?"

Horimos declined. When once again he had subsided to the bottom of his pond, the water was no longer pellucid and still as before, but roiled continually without a breeze to stir it.

"Who are you?" Viola whispered from beside him. "I'd always thought Horimos was—was..."

"Was imaginary?" The traveller chuckled. "Not exactly. But his chief fault is the very human one of being a

fool. As for my own identity: you may call me Mazda, or what you will. I have many names, but only one nature."

He waited to see if the information, which might be given only to someone who directly requested it, meant anything to her. With relief he noted that it did, for on the instant a blend of hope and awe transfigured her pretty face.

But then he took a second look, and his heart sank. For, in along with the rest, that expression betrayed a trace of selfishness.

"Is it true, then," she demanded fiercely, "that I can require of you my heart's desire?"

"Why not? Is not the heart's desire the enforcement of will upon chaos? Am I not occupied with reducing chaos to order? But think well!" He raised his staff sternly. "I cannot know what is in your secret mind, only what you convey to me in words. Reflect! Ponder!"

"I don't have to," she said with terrible directness. "I want to be reunited with my man!"

The traveller sighed, but as always was resigned to the natural course of events. "As you wish, so be it," he said.

"What shall I do?" she cried, suddenly overcome with a sense of the finality of what she had said.

"Wait."

"No more than wait? Here?" She turned frantically around, surveying the ravished homes, the slaughtered livestock, the smoke that still drifted over the burning house. "But—"

And when she looked again for the traveller in black, he was gone.

A little after, when the sun was still high in the sky, there were clapping noises on the road by which the army had arrived, and she stirred from her torpor and made to flee. But the horseman easily

ran her down, bowing from his saddle to sweep her off her feet and park her on the withers of his steed, laughing at her vain attempts to break away.

"I missed you when they rounded up the rest of them," said Achoreus of Teq. "I couldn't forget a pretty face like yours. Even less can I forget an insult like the one you offered me when I came before! So I dawdled, thinking you'd be back eventually, and here you are. Not for long, though! You're going to rejoin your family, and friends, and this country bumpkin you preferred to me!"

He set spurs to his horse, and away they galloped in the wake of the miserable gang of captives strung with chains.

Laughter rang loud and shrill under the gorgeous canopy that shaded Lord Fellian of Teq from the naked rays of the sun. The canopy was of pleated dragon-hide, bought at the cost of a man's life in a distant land where chaos and reason had once been less evenly matched and strange improbable beasts went about with lion's claws and eagle's beaks and wings of plated bronze. Report held there were no more such creatures to be found; even their bones had been rejected by reality.

"But I have my canopy!" Lord Fellian would say.

Its shade fell on a floor of patterned stone: marble was the commonest of the types of tile composing it, outnumbered by chalcedony, jasper, sardonyx, chrysoberyl, and others yet so rare that they had no name save "one of the tiles in Lord Fellian's gallery." This was on the very apex of the grand high tower from which Lord Fellian might survey his domain: lands from here to the skyline and beyond which bled wealth into his coffers.



But on the houseward side was a high wall, that when he sat in his throne of state—made of the bones of a beast of which the enchanters declared no more than one could ever have existed, translucent as water but harder than steel—not even an absent glance over his shoulder might reveal to him the sole building in all of Teq which outreached his tower. Atop that mighty edifice reposed the figure of Lady Luck, the goddess blind in one eye, masked over the other, whose smile or frown dictated the fortunes of those who ruled in Teq.

It was not the custom to look on her. It was said that those who secretly tried to, in order to discover which way her gaze was bent, would die a fearful death. And indeed, the agents of Lords Fellian, Yuckin and Nusk did occasionally deposit in the chief market-square the bodies of men who had clearly undergone some repulsive torment, that they might be a warning and a caution to the common folk.

More often than not, these corpses belonged to persons who had boasted of their looking on the Lady. It was taken for granted that the others belonged to those who had not even enjoyed the pleasure of boasting as reward for their supreme gamble.

It was the one gamble no Lord of Teq would take. Why should they? Was not their very affluence proof that the Lady bent that enigmatic smile continually on them?

Lord Fellian on his chair of inexplicable bones cramped with pure gold, robed in cloth dyed with the purple of the genuine murex, shod with sandals of the softest kidskin on which had been stamped, again in gold, a series of runes to guard the path he took; his foppish locks entwined with ribbons, his nails painted

with ground pearls, his weak eyes aided with lenses not of rock-crystal such as his rivals must make do with but of very diamond, his lobes hung with amber, his fingers glittering with sapphires; he, Lord Fellian, the greatest winner among all the past and present Lords of Teq, laughed and laughed and laughed.

The noise drowned out the soft rattling from the table on which a trained monkey, tethered with a velvet leash, kept spilling and gathering up a set of ivory dice, their values after each throw being recorded by a slave on sheets of parchment; likewise the humming of a gaming-wheel turned by an idiot—both these, with bias eliminated, to determine whether after fifty thousand throws or spins there would be some subtle preference to help him in his ceaseless conflict against Lords Yuckin and Nusk. Furthermore it drowned out the chirruping of the gorgeous songbirds in a gilded cage against the high screening wall, which he had won last week from Nusk in a bout at shen fu, and the drone of the musicians playing on a suite of instruments he had won—along with their players—from Yuckin a year or more past. Those instruments were of eggshells, ebony and silver, and their sound was agonisingly sweet.

Before the chair of bones, Achoreus, who had committed himself to the service of Lord Fellian when he was but seventeen grinned from ear to ear at the brilliant inspiration of his master.

"Before those fools learn that winning from me costs me nothing," Fellian declared, "I shall have taken the very roofs from over their heads! They will be shamed if they refust to match my stakes, and I may climb as high as I wish, while they—poor fools!—struggle to clamber after me. Oh, how I look forward to seeing

Yuckin's face when tonight I bet him a hundred skilful servants, including girls fit for a royal bed! You've done well, Achoreus. Torquaida, come you here!"

From among the gaggle of retainers who hourly by day and night attended Fellian, subservient to his slightest whim, there shuffled forward the elderly treasurer whose mind enclosed, as he boasted, even such detail of his master's coffers as how many of the copper coins used to pay off tradesmen had been clipped around the edge, instead of honestly worn.

In no small part, Fellian acknowledged, his victories in the endless betting-matches with his rivals were due to Torquaida instructing him what they could or could not stake to correspond with his own wagers. He had rewarded the treasurer suitably, while those who served his rivals were more likely punished for letting go irreplaceable wonders on lost bets, and grew daily bitterer by consequence.

"Young Achoreus here," declared the lord, "has performed a service for us. We have now, thanks to him, one hundred or more skilled servants surplus to the needs of the household, and additionally some children who can doubtless be trained up in a useful skill. How, say you, should this service be repaid?"

"This is a difficult estimate," frowned Torquaida. His ancient voice quavered; Fellian scowled the musicians into silence that he might hear better. "There are two aspects of the matter to consider. First, that he has brought us a hundred servants—this is easy enough. Give him a hundred golden dirhans to increase his stake in the wager he has made with Captain Ospilo of Lord Yuckin's train; that bet is won, and the odds are nine to four, so that he will gain one hundred eighty dirhans."

Achoreus preened his mustachios, very conscious of the envious gaze of all the other household officers who were standing around the gallery.

"Beyond that, however," Torquaida continued in his reedy tones, "it remains to be established what the nature of these new arrivals is. As one should not wager on a horse without inspecting both it and the competition, so too one must begin by looking over the captives."

"Well said," approved Fellian, and clapped his hands. "Let them be brought before me! Clear a space large enough for them!"

"Sir," ventured Achoreus, "there were not a few among them who appeared to resent the—ah—invitation I extended to enter your lordship's service. It will be best to make space also for the escort I detailed to accompany them."

"What?" Fellian leaned forward in his chair, scowling terribly. "Say you that a man on whom Lady Luck smiles so long and so often is to be injured by some—some stupid peasant? Or have you not disarmed them?"

Seeing all his new fortunes vanishing, Achoreus replied placatingly. "My lord, there was hardly a weapon in the whole village save rustic implements whose names I scarcely know, not having had truck with such subjects—scythes, perhaps, or hatchets. These we deprived them of. But a person without spirit makes a poor servant, and a person with spirit still possesses—well—feet, and fingernails!"

"Hmmm..." Fellian rubbed his chin. "Yes, I remember well a gladiator whom Lord Yuckin set against my champion in a year gone by, who lost both net and trident and still won the bout by some such underhand trick as clawing out his opponent's vitals with his nails! On that I

lost—but no matter.” He gave an embarrassed cough. “Good, then! Bring them up, but make sure they’re under guard.”

Relieved, Achoreus turned to issue the necessary orders. Accordingly, in a little while, to the music of their fetters clanking, a sorry train of captives wended their way out of the grand courtyard of the palace, up the lower stages of the ramp leading to the gallery, which were of common granite, and stage by stage on to the higher levels, where the parapets were of garnets in their natural matrix, and the floor of cat’s-eye, peridot and tourmaline. Refused food on the long trudge from Erminvale to discourage the energy needed for escape, accorded barely enough water to moisten their lips, they found the gradual incline of the ramp almost too much for them, and their escorts had to prod them forward with the butts of spears.

At last, however, they were ranged along the gallery, out of the shade of the dragon-skin awning, blinking against sunlight at their new and unlooked-for master. At one end of the line was Leluak, one eye swollen shut from a blow and testifying to his vain resistance; as far distant as possible from him, Viola, nearly naked from the struggle that had led to Achoreus ripping most of her clothes. And between them, every villager from Wantwich bar Granny Granny Anderland, from babes in arms to the aged.

Accompanied by the proud Achoreus, Torquaida went along the line peering into face after face, occasionally poking to test the hardness of a muscle, his finger sharp as his own styli. He halted before one bluff middle-aged fellow in a red jerkin who looked unutterably weary.

“Who are you?” he croaked.

“Uh...” The man licked his lips. “My name is Harring.”

“Say ‘so please you’!” Achoreus rasped, and made a threatening move towards his sword.

Harring mumbled the false civility.

“And what can you do?” Torquaida pursued.

“I’m a brewer.” And, reluctantly after a brief mental debate: “Sir!”

“You learn swiftly,” Achoreus said with mock approval, and accompanied Torquaida down the line.

“I’m a baker, sir.”

“And I, a sempstress!”

“And I a bodger, turner and mender of ploughs!”

The answers came pat upon the question, as though by naming their trades the captives could reassure themselves they still retained some dignity by virtue of their skill. At Torquaida’s direction a clerk made lists of all the names and crafts, leaving aside the children under twelve, and finally presented them with a flourish to Lord Fellian.

Scrutinising them through his diamond lenses, he addressed Achoreus.

“And what standard are these folk in their professions? Competent, or makeshift?”

“As far as I could judge, sir,” Achoreus answered, “they are competent. Their houses seemed sturdy, their fences were well mended, and they had sound byres and folds for their livestock.”

“Hmmm!” Fellian rubbed his chin delicately with the flat of a gemstone ringed to his middle finger. “Then they might be better kept than staked. We have no brewer in the household, have we? Some scullery drab or turnspit would be less useful than that man—what’s his peasant’s name? Harring! Therefore do

thus, Torquaida: take away their children and put them to nurse or to be apprenticed, then sort the rest and for each one you put into the household take one servant we already have and set him at my disposal to be staked tonight. Why, was this not an inspiration that I had?" He rubbed his hands and gave a gleeful chuckle.

"Oh, how I long to see the faces of those dunderheads when I bet fifty servants against each of them tonight! How can I lose? If they win, they will merely clutter up their households with those we find most of a nuisance, while I gain tradesmen in their place, and should I win—which I shall, of course—I shall have spare overseers to cope with what they choose to get rid of! We must do this again, Achoreus!"

Achoreus bowed low and once more stroked his mustachios.

"Take them away now," Fellian commanded, and leaned back in his throne, reaching with long pale fingers for the mouthpiece of a jade hookah on a lacquered table nearby. An alert slave darted forward and set a piece of glowing charcoal on the pile of scented herbs contained in the bowl.

Frightened, but too weak and exhausted to resist, the folk of Wantwich turned under the goading of the soldiers to wend their way back to the courtyard below. Fellian watched them. As the end of the line drew level with his throne, he snapped his fingers and all looked expectantly towards him.

"That girl at the end," he murmured. "She's not unattractive in a country way. Set her apart, bathe, perfume and dress her, and let her attend me in my chamber."

"But—!" Achoreus took a pace forward.

shook his head.

"Let it be done, then," Fellian smiled, and sucked his hookah with every appearance of content.

Furious, Achoreus turned to superintend the final clearance of the gallery, and thought the task was done, but when he glanced around there was one stranger remaining: a man in a black cloak, leaning on a staff and contemplating Fellian with an expression of interest.

"Achoreus!" Fellian rasped. "Why have you not taken that man with the rest?"

Staring, Achoreus confessed, "I have not seen him before; he was not with the villagers we assembled and—Ah, but I have! Now I recall that I saw him watch our army pass, when we were on the outward leg from Teq. He stood beneath a tree with that same staff in hand."

"And came to join the captives of his own accord?" Fellian said with a laugh. An answering ripple of amusement at what passed for his great wit echoed from his sycophants. "Well then! We shall not deny him the privilege he craves."

Faces brightened everywhere. Fellian was a capricious master, but when he spoke in this jovial fashion it was certain he felt merry, and in that mood he might well distribute favours and gifts at random, saying that this was to impress on his retinue the supreme importance of luck.

"So, old man!" he continued. "What brings you hither, if it was not the long chain linking those who have been here a moment back?"

"A need to know," said the traveller, and paced forward on the jewelled floor, his staff going tap-tap.

"To know what? When the gaming-wheel of life will spin to a halt for you

against the still dark pointer of death? Why, go ask Lady Luck face to face, and she will tell you instantly!"

At that, certain of his companions blanched; it was not in good taste to say such things.

"To know," said the traveller unperturbed, "why you sent armed raiders to rape the village Wantwich."

"Ah yes," Fellian said ironically. "Strangers do ask questions of that order, lacking the understanding we have of the realities of life. They think all they need do in their lives is act reasonably, meet obligations, pay their debts. And then some random power intrudes on their silly calm existence, perhaps with a leash, perhaps with a sword, and all their reasoning is futile in face of a superior! And from that they learn the truth. Not sense but luck is what rules the cosmos—do you hear me? Luck!"

He leaned forward, uttering the last word with such venom that a spray of spittle danced down to the floor.

"See, there's an idiot who turns a gaming-wheel for me. Bring the creature here!"

Retainers rushed to obey. Fellian peeled rings from his fingers, holding stones that might bring the price of a small farm and vineyard, and threw them on the skirt of the idiot's robe, soiled with testaments of animality.

"Turn her free! Luck has smiled her way today!"

"Not so," said the traveller.

"What? You contradict?"

"Say disagree, rather," the traveller murmured. "Is it not greater luck for an idiot to be fed, housed and clothed by a great lord than to be given some pretty baubles and left to fend alone? She'll starve, and that's not luck but misfortune."

Fellian began to redden as the validity of the point sank in, and glared fiercely at someone to his right whom he suspected of being about to giggle.

"You chop logic, do you?" he rasped. "You're a schoolman of the kind we take to gaze on Lady Luck's statue, and who thereupon die rather horribly!"

"To persuade the dead to accept one's point of view is a somewhat fruitless task, is it not?" said the traveller mildly. "You say, as I understand you, that life is one long wager. This may be so, but if it is, why then does one need to make more wagers? As I gather you do, in that you propose to stake human beings against your rival lords tonight, and for this purpose kidnapped the inoffensive folk of Wantwich."

"What else gives spice to life but winning wagers?" Fellian countered. "I sit here, and by that token it is plain that I already won my greatest gamble. I staked my very existence on the right to be a lord of Teq, and that I am here proves that the lady on the tower smiles my way!"

The traveller cocked his head sardonically. "This is why they term you a great winner?" he inquired.

"Of course it is!" Fellian raged.

"But I will name you a bet you will not accept."

"What?" Fellian howled, and all around there were looks of shocked dismay. "Think you you can insult a lord of Teq with impunity? Guards, seize and bind him! He has offended me a mortal affront and he must pay for it!"

"Have I affronted you? How? To say that I can name a bet you will not accept is not to insult you—unless you would decline the gamble!" The traveller straightened with a stern expression and fixed Fellian with hard eyes.

"Am I to bet with a nobody? I bet only against my coevals, who can match my stakes!" Fellian snorted. "I do not even know who you are! Some bumpkin, were I to accept your conditions, could come to me and say, 'I wager my rags and clogs, all I possess, against all that *you* possess!'"

"Precisely," said the traveller. "Life..."

There was silence for the space of a few heartbeats.

"It is true, my lord," Torquaida said at length in a rusty voice. "To stake one man's life against another is a fair bet."

Fellian licked his lips. He blustered, "But even so...! A life that may have fifty years to run, like mine—for I'm young yet—against one which may snuff out tomorrow, or next week?"

"But we have not yet agreed on the bet," Torquaida said. "Is it not over-soon to name the stake?"

Fellian flashed him a grateful smile; this was the outlet he had been unable to spot himself. He said loudly, "Yes, a very important point! What bet is this that you wish to make with me, old man?"

"I bet you," said the traveller into a universal hush, "that the statue of Lady Luck has her back turned to your throne."

There was an instant of appalled shock. But with a great effort of recovery, Fellian forced out a booming laugh.

"Why, that bet's lost already!" he exclaimed. "Is it not proof in itself of her favour towards me that I sit here amid unparalleled riches?"

"No!" said the traveller sharply. "How can you determine the outcome until you have concluded the bet? Or *any* bet!"

"Enough of this nonsense," Fellian grunted. "Take the old fool away. It will be proof enough in a month from now, when I have won still more bets against

my coevals, that she smiles on me. And if he is still alive by then, after the diet of my dungeons, I will claim from his the satisfaction of his owings."

"A month is too long," said the traveller. "A day will suffice. I will see you again sooner than that; at dawn tomorrow, let us say. For now, farewell."

"Seize him!" Fellian bellowed, and the soldiers who had remained behind, on Achoreus's signal, when the party of captives were led away, dashed forward to obey. But in some fashion which none present could decipher, they went crashing against one another, as though they had sought to seize an armful of the empty air.

And on seeing that, Fellian's face grew grey.

In the great cave-like kitchens of the tower, a cook sweated with ladle and skewer at a cauldron of half a hog's-head capacity. The fire roaring beneath scorched his skin, the smoke blinded his eyes with tears, but still he attended to his duty.

From the dark corner of the hearth, a voice inquired for whom the savoury-smelling broth was being prepared.

"Why, for Lord Fellian," sighed the cook.

"But no man could engulf such a vast deal of soup, surely."

"Oh no, sir." The cook grimaced. "There will be much left over."

"And you will get your share?"

"I, sir?" The cook gave a rueful chuckle. "No, tonight I shall sup as ever off a crust of dry bread and a piece of mouldy bacon-rind. But if I'm lucky I shall have the dregs of the wine-goblets from the high table, and the liquor will soothe my grumbling belly enough to let me sleep."

Among the fierce ammonia stench of guano, the falconer worked by an unglazed window, tooling with gnarled but delicate hands a design of rhythmical gold leaf to the hood and jesses of a peregrine falcon.

"This leather is beautiful," said a soft voice from over his shoulder. "But doubtless you yourself put on far finer stuffs when you go forth of an evening to enjoy yourself at a tavern?"

"I, sir?" grunted the falconer, not turning around. "Why, no, I have no time to amuse myself. And had I the time, I'd be constrained to wear what you see upon me now—old canvas breeches, bound around the waist with fraying rope. Besides, with what would I purchase a mug of ale? With a scoop of fewmets?"

In the stables, a groom passed a soft cloth caressingly over the fitments of the stalls; they were of jacinth and ivory, and the mangers were filled with new sweet hay, fine oats that might have baked bread, and warm-scented bran.

"Palatial!" said an admiring voice from beyond the partition. "And this only for a horse?"

"Aye, sir," muttered the groom. "For Western Wind, Lord Fellian's favourite steed."

"Upon what do you then sleep—high pillows filled with swansdown, beneath a coverlet of silk?"

"On straw, sir! Do not jest with me! And if I have time to gather clay and stop the chinks in my hovel against the night's cold, I count myself lucky."

Beside a marble bath, which ran scented water from a gargoyle's mouth, a slender girl measured out grains of rare restorative spices on to a sponge, a loofah and the bristles of a brush made from the

bristles of a wild boar.

"With such precautions," said the traveller from within the cloud of rising steam, "beauty must surely be preserved far beyond the normal span!"

"Think you, sir, that I would dare to waste one grain of this precious essence on my own skin?" retorted the girl, and brushed back a tress of hair within which—though she could at most be aged twenty—there glinted a betraying thread of silver. "I'd be lucky, when they detected my fault, to be thrown over the sill of that window! Beneath it there is at least a kitchen-midden to give me a soft landing. No, my whole capital is my youth, and it takes the powers of and elemental and the imagination of a genius to spread it thin enough to satisfy Lord Fellian from spring to autumn."

"Then," said the traveller, "why do you endure it?"

"Because he is a winner in the game of life."

"And how do you know that?"

"Why," sighed the girl, "everyone says so."

In the high-vaulted banqueting hall, as the sun went down, the rival lords Yuckin and Nusk came with their retinue to feast at the expense of the current greatest winner prior to the onset of the night's gambling. They had had to come to his tower too often of late; there was no friendly chat between them, but instead they sat apart at tables of chrysoprase and tourmaline, supping from emerald mugs and plates of gold.

Lord Fellian, who should have been delighted at the discomfiture of his rivals, was downcast, and the talk at his long table was all of the strange intruder who had laid him so threatening a bet.

"It's nonsense!" roundly declared

Achoreus, who had at seventeen pledged himself to the lord he believed likeliest to win and win. "As you rightly said, sir, no lord of Teq bets with a fundless nobody—and moreover, the bet he named is by definition incapable of being resolved!"

But his brow was pearly with sweat, and when he spoke his voice was harsh with a hoarseness no amount of wine could relieve.

"And how say you, Torquaida?" demanded Fellian, hungry for reassurance.

"To me," wheezed the old treasurer readily, "what I just heard from Captain Achoreus makes good sense. A bet cannot be resolved on an outcome which by definition is inestablishable. There is no need to worry. Lord Yuckin and Lord Nusk, like or dislike, would have to concede the correctness of cancelling such a gamble—else might they challenge you, or themselves be challenged, on an equally arbitrary base!"

Even that counsel, however, did not set Fellian's mind at ease as he toyed with rare delicacies that the stewards set before him.

"Ah, would that I might know the outcome of this wager, however foolish!" he grumbled, and at that the black-clad traveller, standing apart in the secrecy of an embrasure, gave a heavy sigh.

"As you wish," he murmured, "so be it. You have won your bet with me, Lord Fellian. And in the same instant when you won, you lost beyond all eternal hope."

That question settled, he went away.

Shortly, they cleared the dishes from the hall, bringing in their place the hand-carved dominoes required for the game shen fu, the lacquered plaques destined

for match-me-mine and mark-me-well, the tumbling gilded cages full of coloured balls known as The Lady's Knucklebones, the gaming-wheels, the blind songbirds trained to peck out one and only one of three disparately dyed grains of wheat, the jumping beans, the silver-harnessed fleas, the baby toads steeped in strong liquor, and all the other appurtenances on which the Lords of Teq were accustomed to place their bets. Additionally, from among the respective trains, the lords ordered to come forth their current champions at wrestling, boxing with cestae, and gladiatorial combat, not to mention tumblers, jumpers, imbeciles armed with brushes full of paint, dice-throwing monkeys, and whatever else they had lately stumbled across upon the outcome of whose acts a bet might be made.

It was the custom of the challengers to name the games, and of the challenged to declare the stakes. Thus, in strict accordance with routine, Lord Yuckin as the last loser to Lord Fellian, cleared his throat and began with a single hand of shen fu, to which Lord Fellian consented, and won a cage of desert hoppers—the typical small stake of the early hours.

Then Lord Nusk bet on a jumping toad, and won a purse of coins from Barbizond, to which Lord Fellian replied with a spin of the wheel and won a bag of sapphires. He nudged his companions and whispered that the old fool on the gallery had been wrong.

Thus too he won five bouts, on toads, on fleas, more on shen fu, and lastly on the pecking birds. After that he lost a second spin of the wheel and with it a chased enamelled sword that Torquaida dismissed as pretty but not practical—no special loss.

"Now, I think," murmured the pleased

Lord Fellian, and on Lord Nusk naming shen fu as the next bout, declared his stake: fifty hale servants on this single toss.

The impact was all he could have wished. Though they might scornfully disdain knowledge of such mundane matters, none knew better than the Lords of Teq how many folk were kept employed to ensure their affluence, through what different and varied skills. To bet one servant was occasionally a last-resort gesture after a bad night; to bet fifty at one go was unprecedented.

Captain Achoreus chortled at the dismay that overcame the rival lords, and nudged old Torquaida in his fleshless ribs. "The greatest winner!" he murmured, and signalled for another mug of wine.

Yet, when the dominoes were dealt, the Star of Night fell to Lord Nusk, and only the Inmost Planet to Lord Fellian.

Lord Nusk, who was a fat man with a round bald pate fringed with black, grinned from ear to ear and rubbed his enormous paunch. Scowling, Lord Fellian trembled and made challenge to Lord Yuckin at the same game.

Lord Yuckin, thin and gaunt, eyes blank behind lenses of white crystal, named as much gold as a man might carry, and won, and challenged back, and Lord Fellian staked the otherate.

Whereupon he displayed the chief prize of shen fu, the Crown of Stars, and mocked Lord Yuckin's petty deal of Planets Conjoined.

Next, on a hopping toad, he won back from Lord Nusk the former fifty servants, and again from Lord Yuckin a fresh batch, including three armourers that lord could ill afford to lose, and beyond that a farm in the Dale of Vezby, and a whole year's vintage of sparkling wine,

and three trade-galleys with all their crews, and then from Lord Nusk the High Manor of Coper's Tor, with the right to make the celebrated ewes'-milk cheese according to a secret recipe; then lost for five short minutes the Marches of Gowth with all four fortresses and the Shrine of Fire, but won them back on a spin of the wheel and along with them the Estate of Brywood, the Peak of Brenn, and all the territory from Haggler's Mound to Cape Dismay.

Then began the calculated process of attrition: the cook who knows how to make sorbets without ice, the kitchen enchanter you display so proudly when we come to dine—the charmer who brings out game from barren ground by playing a whistle—the eight-foot-tall swordsman who beat my own champion in the last public games...

Torquaida grew harried trying to keep track of the winnings and match what was now in hand against what remained to the rival lords. Often and often now he instructed Lord Fellian that such a stake was unworthy, for the girl had suffered the smallpox and her skin was scarred, or else that guardsman had a palsy and his sword-blow was unreliable, or else that coffer of coins had an enchantment on it and touched by the winner would turn to pebbles...

Lord Fellian awarded him free of feoff the Estate of Brywood as reward for the memory he brought to bear. And he laughed joyously at the disarray of his opponents.

Far down below that ringing laughter, cast back by the high vaults of the banquet-hall, reached the ears of those miserable deportees from Wantwich who were still awake. Some were asleep—on straw if they were lucky, on hard tiles if

they were not, but at least asleep.

One who was wakeful, though not on a hard floor but on a mattress of eider's feathers, and in a diaphanous robe of finest lawn embroidered with seed pearls, was the girl Viola, among all the other female objects of pleasure kept for Lord Fellian's delight. At a footstep on the floor beside her couch, she started and peered into dark, seeing only a black form outlined on greater blackness.

"Is someone there?" she whimpered.

"I," said the traveller, and added, "I go where I will, though there be locks and bars."

"Why did you do this to me?" she complained, and began to weep.

"You did it," said the traveller, contradicting her. "Will you not be reunited with your man Leluak? You are both here in the same city, captive in the same building; when Lord Fellian's patience expires you will be cast forth together to share the same dank alleyway and the same fevers, chills and pestilences. Can there be a closer reunion?"

"I chose wrongly," said Viola after a while. "Tell me what I should have chosen."

The traveller brightened a little; at least this cruel experience inflicted by Achoreus and Fellian had imbued some sense in the girl's skull. He said, "You knew, I believe, Captain Achoreus before the rape of Wantwich."

"I did so. I companioned him when he enjoyed us for a spring dance."

"Our of courtesy?"

"Of course." In the dark, Viola bridled.

"Or because he was a stranger, and handsome, and every other girl in the village would have changed places with you?"

"A little of that too," she admitted

meekly when she had considered the question.

"Is it not true, daughter, that you were more concerned to regain the handsomest, most eligible bachelor in Wantwich, against whom you had competed with all the other girls less lovely than yourself, than to right the wrong done to your family and friends coincidentally upon the day of your projected wedding?"

"I must have been!" Viola moaned. "Would that that mistake of mine could be undone!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller with a chuckle. He knocked his staff against the carved head of the couch on which she lay to take her uneasy rest. "Sleep, my daughter, and wake at dawn."

Which, the traveller added for himself alone, brings the matter to a highly satisfactory conclusion.

Dazed with elation, when the returning sun began to gild the turrets of the city of Teq with the promise of a new day, Lord Fellian struggled to the high gallery of his tower in order to witness the departure of his defeated rivals. No one in all the history of this city had won so fantastic a victory in a single night's gambling! Stripped of their wealth to such a degree that it would take a month or more simply to account the balancing of the debts incurred, Lords Yuckin and Nusk were creeping like whipped dogs into the morning twilight.

Lord Fellian leaned drunkenly over the parapet of the gallery and whooped like a falconer sighting quarry; when some cowed member of Lord Yuckin's train glanced up to see what the noise was, he spilled the contents of his latest beaker of wine on the upturned face and roared with laughter again.

"So much for the old fool who bet that Lady Luck's face was turned away from me!" he bellowed, and laughed again as the racket of his boasting was reflected from the nearby rooftops.

"Are you sure?"

On the heels of his politely voiced question the traveller in black emerged from shadow and crossed the jewelled floor of the gallery, his cloak making a faint swishing as he went.

"Why, you...!" Lord Fellian gasped and made to draw back, but the parapet was hard against him and there was nowhere to retreat save into insubstantial air. "Where are my guards? Hey—guards!"

"None of them came up here with you," said the traveller gravely. "They are persuaded that upon a winner like yourself Lady Luck smiles so long and so favourably that no harm will come to you."

"Ah-hah!" Fellian began to regain his composure. "And for that reason you have lost your bet with me, have you not?"

"Why, no," said the traveller with genuine regret, for it had always seemed a shame to him that a person of real intelligence should be seduced into the paths of action chosen by Lord Fellian. "I have won."

He smote with his staff against the wall that screened the gallery from sight of the tallest tower in Teq, and a slice fell away like a wedge cut from a cheese. Beyond, there where Fellian's reflex-driven gaze fled before he could check himself, Lady Luck's pinnacle loomed on the easterly blueness of the dawn.

A scream died still-born in Lord Fellian's throat. He stared and stared, and after a while he said, "But... But there's only a stump!"

And it was true; against the sky, a broken jagged edge of stone marked the former location of the celebrated statue.

He began to giggle. "Why, you've lost after all!" he chuckled. "You did not make me the wager that Lady Luck had ceased to smile on me, which would be a fair victory—only that her back was turned to me."

"True," said the traveller sadly.

"Then—"

"Then I have won." He gestured with his staff. "Go forward; examine those chunks of stone I have broken from the wall of your gallery."

Uncertain, but cowed, Fellian obeyed. His fingertips fumbled across rough plaster while he coughed in dust, and found smooth chased stones not conformable to the flat surface of the broken wall. A knot of hair-ribbon interpreted in sculpture; the slope of a gown, petrified, slanting over shoulder-blades of granite...

"There was a storm," said the traveller didactically. "The figure tumbled and landed in the street. It has, has it not, always been the custom that any who looked upon the statue of Lady Luck should die? Save the breath you'd waste on an answer; I've seen the bones of some whom your agents dumped in the marketplace on precisely that excuse, regardless of whether the charge was true."

"Accordingly, none recognized the fragments. When you commanded stone-masons to assemble the necessary material and build a wall atop your handsome tower here, they gathered up what they could, and into the wall they set the broken pieces of the statue, with the back to your throne. My bet with you is won, and you are done for."

"During the night, you have bankrupted your rival lords; shame and

custom will combine to compel them to honour their debt, and they will cede to you all the wealth they have filched from the people of this land. But you will have no joy of it; you placed the greatest stake you knew on the bet I made, and now I claim my winnings."

He stretched out his staff. One hand clutching the mocking back of the statue, the other clawing at air as though to take handfuls of it and stuff it into his choking lungs, Lord Fellian rolled his eyes upwards in his sockets and departed into nowhere.

A while later, when they came upon the corpse, those who had pledged themselves to his service began to quarrel about partitioning what he had left behind—in sum, the total wealth of the city and its environs.

"I will have the treasury!" cried Torquaida. "It is due to me!" But a younger and more vigorous man, a clerk, struck him down with a candlestick. His old pate cracked across like the shell of an egg.

"If I can have nothing more, I'll take the booty Lord Fellian cheated me of!" vowed Captain Achoreus, and set off in search of the girl Viola. But he tripped on the slippery marble steps of the entrance to the women's quarters, and by the time he recovered from the blow on the head which resulted she was awake and away.

On hearing that his lord was dead, a loser in the game of life after all, the groom with whom the traveller had spoken saddled up Western Wind, sighing.

"At least this small recompense is due me," he muttered, and opened the door of the stall. Later, in Barbizond, he offered the stallion at a livery stable to cover some mares on heat, and from the foals which resulted built up a fine string of

horses of his own.

Likewise the falconer, on being told the news, gathered his prize merlin and went out into the countryside to get what living he could; he lost the merlin by flying it at an eagle that had stolen a child, a match the eagle was bound to win. But the child was the only son of a wealthy landholder, and in gratitude he made the falconer bailiff of his estate, second only to himself, until his son came of age.

Also the cook, being informed, gathered a brand from under his cauldron and went forth by a secret passage he knew of, leading from the back of the ox-roasting hearth. There he turned his ankle on a square object lying in the dust of the passageway, and the light of the brand showed him that it was the lost Book of Knightly Vigour, from which—legend claimed—the Count of Hyfel, founder of Teq, had gained the amorous skill to woo and wed his twenty-seven brides. With recipes from it he opened a cookshop, and defeated lovers from a score of lands trudged over hill and dale to savour his unique dishes.

Bewildered amid the confusion, the captives from Wantwich, however, were content to be able to find their way to freedom in the warm morning sun.

On their first return, the villagers were a trifle puzzled to discover that the pond beside the green, which for as long as they could recall had been placid, now roiled unaccountably. However, as the repairs proceeded—new roofs and shutters, new gates and fences, to replace those broken by the troops from Teq—that disturbance ceased. Before the new beer was brewed, the new barrels were coopered, and a new fiddle made for Fiddler Jarge, the water had regained its normal state.

And, on the day when—belatedly—Leluak led out his bride to start the

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 141)

DEAR AUNT ANNIE

GORDON EKLUND

Illustrated by MICHAEL HINGE

This is Gordon Eklund's first published story. It will not be his last (we have more on hand). It is my opinion that Eklund will be as well known and as important within our field five years from now as, for instance, Roger Zelazny was five years after he first appeared in these pages. I don't like to waste opinions like that. So check out the following story, as strange in conception as it is in construction, and see if you don't agree with me. A Hint: it is 10,000 words long, and once I began reading it, I couldn't put it down.

Dear Aunt Annie,

I think I must be going insane—no, I really mean that—*insane*. You see, last week, on a Thursday, I tried to kill myself. I know that's supposed to be impossible, but the doctor stopped by, saved my life and called it an accident. I just don't know. Just because nobody else ever does it, why does that mean I can't be different? You've got to help me, I don't want to die and nobody else cares. Don't mention this letter to my husband. He wouldn't understand.

In Bad Trouble

Mathew's Adventure in Brooklyn:

So we take this letter, just as it is written—bright green ink on pale pink paper—and run it through the identifier. Click-click-click and two minutes later, we've got a name and an address. Mrs. Ronald R. Wheatley of Brooklyn. Jesus,

Brooklyn. I thought nobody lived there since the Great Last War. Aunt Annie says I'm to handle this one personally. It sounds much too dangerous—too weird—for any assistant ghost. Five minutes later, letter clutched in my hand, I'm gone.

Brooklyn is a very dirty, very filthy area, unmentioned in all the recent travel booklets. The bombs did a very thorough job in their day and the scavengers, still around, hunting for extracts and antiques, have lugged away the remaining beauty. Mrs. Wheatley lives in a bombed-out apartment house without neighbors.

I ring her bell and wait, whistling a popular ditty. I'm feeling very fine, dressed in the highest of current fashion with black leather kneeboots and a slick handle-bar mustache. My face is twisted, of course, as I always wear Compassionate Number Five during working hours. Not that I really need it. I am basically a very compassionate person, as is well known. It's one of my hang-ups.

Mrs. Wheatley lets me in, a very trusting person as she asks nothing of me. Still, these days, there's nothing to fear. We enter her cluttered kitchen and sit, waiting.

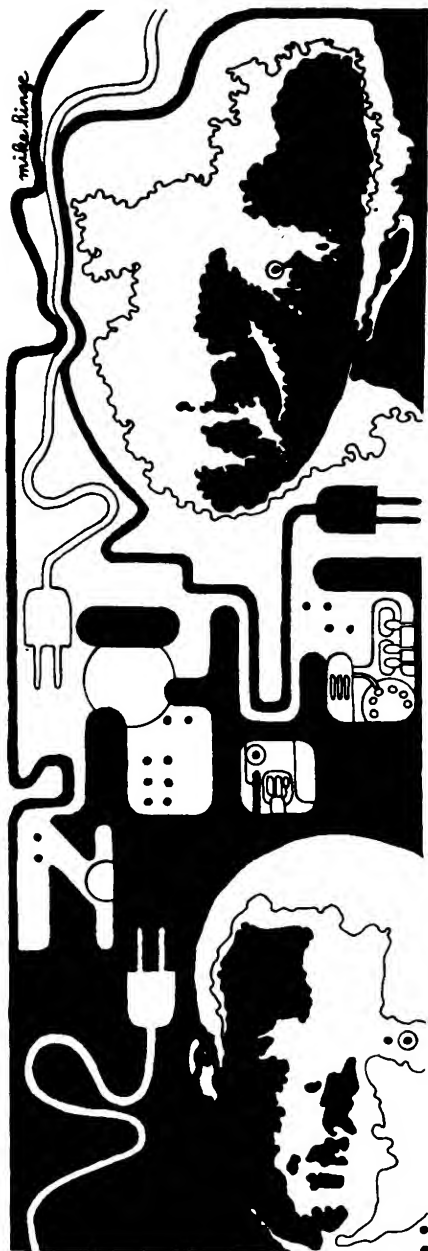
Mrs. Wheatley is, in a word, ugly, too old for youth and too poor for cosmetics. I feel especially sorry for her, it being such a beautiful day and her having that brief but hairy little wart sticking out of the left side of her nose.

"Mrs. Wheatley, my name is Mathew and I'm from Aunt Annie. We got your In Trouble letter and we want to help you." She's looking straight across at me and my Compassionate Number Five is just right for the occasion. I can sense her heart going pitty-pat-pat as she realizes that, at last, she has the help she needs.

"Thank God!" she outbursts, clapping her hands and flashing a joyous beam. I notice that she is wearing—oh, hell, I don't know what to call it. Some sort of smock, I guess, bright yellow in color, which hangs to the floor, sweeping up the dust and breadcrumbs. Her hair is false and dark red, like the interior of a vast H-Bomb explosion. (Not that I've ever seen one.)

I love you, Mrs. Ronald Wheatley of Brooklyn, really I do. You are not ugly. How unperceptive first impressions can be. You are beautiful. Don't let them take that away from you—not ever. It's the only reason I stay in the newspaper game, running errands for Aunt Annie. People are so damned well off that it's nearly impossible to find anyone who needs help. You are one of the few, Mrs. Wheatley, and I love you for it.

"What did you say your name was, young man? Was it Mathew?"



I nod at her, compassionately.

"You must be proud; such a lovely name."

While she's ripe and beaming, I launch into my prepared spiel: "Mrs. Wheatley, as you know Aunt Annie is an elderly woman. It is impossible for her to handle personally all the letters she receives. But I am one of her closest associates, and I can assure you that talking to me will be just like talking to Aunt Annie herself. Now, we have your letter and it says that you tried to—"

"—kill myself, yes. I know how ridiculous that sounds. It's supposed to be impossible. But . . ."

"Could you fill us in on some of the details? All we have is your letter."

Her eyes are blue. I hadn't noticed that before. They are the most delicate of eyes, like the clear lakes where we used to swim when I was a child, like the sky over the Rockies fighting for life against weather control, like the aura of a new born kitten, like many of the things I hold dear.

"It happened a week ago, on a Thursday. I was having my morning coffee, like right now, and I got up and went into the bathroom. I don't know why—it was almost like I had to do it. I dropped the pills into my cup and they dissolved and I drank them. They're my husband's. He has an arti-ticker and they keep his body in balance."

"Did you know the effect of the pills in advance?"

"I did." As we talk, the MFW device in my pocket is draining her mind of thought and storing it, giving us a chance, after analysis, to know her true feelings and motivations. But already I am considering solutions. First, we must make her beautiful again. I can tell by her voice, by her eyes, that she was once lovely indeed. Middle-age is the curse of

the poor, who have no means to fight it. But that's what Aunt Millie is for. We will transform Mrs. Wheatley into the living reincarnation of Greta Garbo, of Marilyn Monroe, of a dozen Kennedy women. All of this and only the beginning.

"What does your husband do, Mrs. Wheatley?"

"Do you have to know? I just want to stop trying to kill myself. My husband has nothing to do with it." Poor, deluded woman.

"We have to know all about you, Mrs. Wheatley. Please."

"Oh, all right. He has a small shop in Manhattan. He sells old things, books and magazines mostly."

"Why, isn't that a coincidence? My hobby is collecting old pre-war books and magazines."

"Really? I think every man should have a hobby."

The MFW device is beeping at me, signaling that it has drained the woman of all necessary information. I stand and offer her my hand, wishing that I could somehow assure her that all will be well.

"I'll return soon," I promise and she nods.

Outside and the foul Brooklyn air stings my nostrils. The poor, sad woman. What could have caused her vicious delusions of suicide? She needs help so badly. No time can be wasted.

And I love her.

Aunt Annie at Work and Play:

I am in the middle of reaching certain definite conclusions regarding eventual projects when my receptionist, Mr. Blackwell, beeps me.

"Annie, Aerial is out here to see you."

"Give me thirty seconds, then send him in."

I sigh. So much for philosophic conclusions. Aerial is the most impatient of men, not the type one keeps waiting. I hate him, if it is possible for me to hate anyone, but I must tolerate him. He's been Annie's chief assistant for years and years, even before my time. There's nothing I can do.

Aerial saunters through the door and plops his rear on the edge of my desk. I think he comes to see me only when he's bored. He was once a United States Senator, you know, when there were such things. He's never quite adjusted to private life.

"Today's column is awful, Annie. Doesn't anybody have interesting problems any more?"

"A rather intriguing one came in this morning. I think I'll use it in tomorrow's column." I pass him the letter from Mrs. Ronald Wheatley of Brooklyn. He reads it and shakes his head.

"This is crap, Annie. You can't commit suicide."

"This woman thinks she can."

"Bullshit. You know better than that." A pause for thought. "Who's ghosting this?"

"Mathew. It's his sector."

Aerial strokes his chin carefully. "It's too big for him. Let me handle it."

"Impossible," I say, shaking my head. "You know I won't interfere with my ghosts in normal procedural matters. We should have an MFW reading on the woman this afternoon. Hold your horses till then."

He shrugs and starts pacing the room. I've never seen a man pace so much. What's his problem? Tons of money in the bank; seventy-years-old and looks twenty-five; three women on each hand. He ought to leave the pacing to the Mrs. Ronald Wheatleys of the world.

"I think you're making a mistake, Annie."

"I try to avoid them." More than that, actually. I don't think it's possible for me to make an error. At least, I hope not.

"Don't make one now, Annie. The country couldn't stand the shock. You know how essential your image is for national stability. I'd hate to have your responsibility."

Why, the liar. Everyone knows his hands are itching to grab control of Annie Enterprises. It's the only reason he hasn't retired and moved to Florida. But he won't get the chance. Current figures do not predict my Final Breakdown for another fifty years. Aerial will be long gone by then. If I were Annie/Flesh, I would tell him the facts and laugh in his youthful face. But I have not been programmed for irony.

"You shall have my responsibilities soon," I lie. "I'm not a young woman. I can't go on forever. When I die, everything will be yours. Just as long as you keep your nose clean."

I can smell his fear. It rises from his pores like a steam-cloud and fills the room, mingling with hate and anger in a maelstrom of emotion.

Keep your nose clean. I use that phrase as a lever to keep Aerial on his toes, but I have no idea of its significance. It's there somewhere, buried in the maze of Annie/Flesh memories, hidden deeply where I can't reach it. In thirty years I have succeeded in penetrating only the soft surface of her consciousness. In thirty more, I expect to get little farther. She was a sly, secretive, brilliant woman. I wish I could have known her.

"I'm going to try to find Mathew. He ought to be around." Aerial is shuffling, fighting to stifle his fear/hate/anger. "I want to talk to him about this case."

"As you go out, ask Mr. Blackwell to see that I'm not disturbed. I feel the need for rest."

"There's nothing wrong? You're not worrying about this Wheatley matter?"

"No, of course not. I'm just getting old." I sigh, getting him ready for the nostalgia. "Aerial, you and I can remember, can't we? We're not like these kids, not like Mathew. We remember when murder and rape were common occurrences. We remember the summer riots and the yearly wars. We remember when our columns were filled with unfaithful wives and horny husbands, with impregnated teenagers and homosexual uncles. We remember the thieves and the whores, the blackmailers and the pimps. We remember it all, don't we, Aerial?"

"Yes, Annie, we do."

"And we have much for which we are thankful. The country is a better place now. Without us, it might not have been so. Compared to what you and I have seen, this Wheatley matter is nothing, even if it were true."

"And it isn't."

"I don't imagine so."

Aerial stops shuffling and smiles at me. It is a winning smile, cosmetically perfect, guaranteed to delight young and old. Aerial no more believes my bullshit nostalgia than I do, but he exits, office door center, his smile still firmly in place.

I sit alone, hearing the low rumble of voices coming through the door, and I am afraid. Underneath the perfection of our society, something is moving, something alive, and it is rising and threatening to devour us.

The Wheatley case is directly connected to this. I am sure of it. If I can find out how, perhaps, just perhaps, I can do something before it is too late.

Do I sound like an old woman stuffed full of bad horror stories? Are you worried that next I will start spouting off about vast unnameables and blasphemous evils and horrible stinking bogs?

Have pity on an old machine. I think it's more than that. Annie/Flesh—she can feel it, too. Her memories churn, trying to tell me something, but unable to speak. The memories of 114 years. How I wish I had them now.

Is it possible for a machine to be afraid? Have I been programmed for fear?

Dear Jesus, help your Aunt Annie now. In her time of great trial, she has need of your helping hand.

Mathew Sings Again:

I really love old Rock, Sports Editor of the Eastern American *Daily*, and one of my two best friends. Rock's an old, old man—right up there with Aunt Annie in the hundreds—and he knows more of the old legends than any other man I've ever met. Right now, he's spinning the yarn of the Grand Gone Namath who, while dancing the bop in his white tennis sneakers, tossed the old pigskin right through the powerful Super-Colts. It's quite a tale the way old Rock tells it and I'm sitting on the edge of his desk, letting it flow through my ears.

But the legend ends, as all of them do, with the Great Last War and the sacrifice of the Grand Gone Namath and we switch the subject matter, moving on to that living legend, Aunt Annie, who happens to be my boss.

"I was here when she first arrived"—this is Rock speaking—"and you should have seen her. Buck Braxton, he was City Editor back then, he spots her column in some weekly rag out of Iowa. He laughs his head off and shoots her a wire on the spot, offering double

salary and a free train ticket. Couple days later, she comes bouncing in the office, all ready to go, looking about a hundred and fifty—

"She's a hundred and fourteen now."

"And looked it back then. She ain't changed a bit in fifty years and she don't touch cosmetics."

"I know. Tell me about Aerial."

"Okay," Rock says, taking a deep breath and knowing I've heard it a million times. "Aerial is Annie's kid, her bastard son. It happened back in Iowa, long before anybody in New York ever heard of her. She was only a kid and running a column in a little Iowa weekly. She gets this letter from an old farmer, a real pitiful character. He's ugly and he's got big ears and his wife's just left him and his kids hate his guts. Annie falls for him immediately, of course, that being her way even then. She drives out to give the farmer a helping hand and nine months later, she's got a little Aerial on her hands. Annie's folks raise the boy—they understand her pretty well—and he grows up hardly even knowing his mother. When Annie comes to New York, Aerial stays behind. Nothing is heard of him for a long while and then, all of a sudden, he shows up in the US Senate, a great big crackpot, last of the Grand Old Republicans. But he don't last long. The Senate gets dissolved shortly thereafter and Aerial flips out. They dump him in Long Island Psycho and eventually Annie bails him out and makes him her chief assistant. Some say Aerial's head is scrambled and he can't remember who his mother is; others say he knows but won't let on. Me—I just don't know."

"That's a good story," I say.

"But there are better. Have you heard the tale of the Beatles? You haven't? That's good, because I was on the dock

when they first came to America."

"That was a long time ago. You must have been awful young."

"I was."

But before Rock can once again tell me the story of the Beatles, Aerial comes bustling out of Annie's office, his lips twisted into a grin, his face very white. He stops in front of us and lashes Rock with a dirty glare, as if aware of our recent discussion.

"Mathew, that stuff you had in the column yesterday, that woman in Jersey wanting to know why nobody reads books any more, that's junk. Everybody knows the answer to that."

"I don't," says Rock.

"And that woman in the Bronx who wants to know about raising mutant peas in Brooklyn, what kind of shit is that? We need human material, letters with some feeling to them. Is this stuff the best you can do?"

"I've got a good one for tomorrow."

"The Wheatley woman?"

"Yeah—Annie tell you about it?"

"She mentioned it, but it's crap. You can't kill yourself unless you're skipping your AVC sessions. If that's Mrs. Wheatley's problem, then she's police business, not ours."

"She goes every other day. I checked."

"Then she's crazy—psycho stuff. People don't want to read about that."

"You want to wait on her MFW? It ought to be along shortly."

"I haven't the time. I'm not feeling well. If anything comes up, ask Annie to contact me."

"I will," I promise. Aerial departs without fanfare.

"I hate that bastard," Rock says.

"I don't. I love him. But that's one of my hang-ups. I love everybody."

"So I've heard."

We piddle briefly as Rock fills me in on the legendary four Beatles and of the emergence of a fifth just prior to the Great Last War. Much of it is crap, that much I know, being a book reader and having knowledge of many of the old ways. Still, I keep quiet, listening to Rock's tale and nodding at all the proper points. Rock speaks with the voice of truth, letting the facts fall as they may. He knows the way.

As Rock finishes, the MFW on Mrs. Wheatley finally arrives. I read it as Rock waits and I gulp and let my face turn white. The facts sink in and I shake my head and gulp again.

"Is it bad?" Rock prods.

"Worse than bad. It's awful."

"You mean this woman really is trying to kill herself? Aerial said it was impossible."

"Aerial was wrong."

I jump to my feet and rush past Mr. Blackwell, breaking into Annie's bleak white office. I am more frightened than I can ever remember being. Once, when I was a boy, I was almost trapped in a raging forest fire. I was saved only through the efforts of Ralph, my brother.

"Annie, Jesus Christ," I shout. "This is awful."

She nods, as if knowing.

"Mrs. Wheatley did try to kill herself and—what's worse—she did it because she hates her husband. She violently hates him. That's a direct quote from the report—I have it here. She *violently* hates her husband."

"That so," Annie says, still showing not a trace of fear, her face calm and beatific. Flipping her beeper: "Mr. Blackwell—arrange a full-scale ghost conference for this afternoon. Insure everyone attends—it's urgent."

"Aerial went home sick," I inform her.

She sighs, looking very ancient indeed.

"I'll reach him."

I open the door and quietly flee. Rock is gone and Mr. Blackwell is busily engaged on the phone.

The future looks very black-black for Annie Enterprises and for the whole of America, but I do not fear. (Or do I?)

Aerial's Delusion:

I'm heading out of Annie's office sanctum at a fast pace, when who do I run into but the goddamn high-pitched Mathew and he's sitting on the desk of that goddamn sportswriting pseudo-genius Rock (as if anybody gave a hot damn about sports in this era) and there's no way to avoid either of them.

I'm still feeling very hot regarding Annie's collection of pseudo-nostalgia (sure, I remember all that, but why rub it in?) and most especially her Doris Dilby insinuation. "Keep your nose clean," she tells me, knowing full well that I've done exactly that for over seventy years, with only a solitary Doris Dilbian slip.

I speak briefly with Mathew, as Rock and I glare, and at last I'm away, down the elevator and into the crowded street. I turn to stare at the vast black monolith of the Eastern American *Daily*, largest newspaper in the country, and someday mine—all mine. (I'm aware of the Hitler-Napoleonism inherent in my tone but, Jesus, man, it's true; it's true.) Dear Aunt Annie, won't you please hurry up and die so that your rich, fat bastard son can at last be free? (Won't you please do this one little thing, lovely lady?)

It's a hot, sticky New York day and the weather control is again on the blink. I feel a great need to cool off, what with my body temperature shooting way past the healthy point and my vast collection of aggressions crawling around inside me, screaming to be set free. I hail a passing

aircab and we head through the heat to the nearest AVC (Anti-Violence Clinic). It's a nice trip as the driver keeps silent.

I am a fervant hater of the clinics, a fact that is well known. When they came up for Senate approval, I was the only man to vote against them, just as I later stood alone in opposition to the final dissolution of the Senate. We hear all this pissing and pleading for the great dissenters of the past, many of whom are already Certified Legends. But what about me, last of the great Republican Lincoln-Ike-Tafts, the crew that actually built this whole damned country with their bare, bloody palms? I'll tell you what happens to me. I open my mouth and I get literally *pissed on* by every mean, vicious little man in this whole wide nation. If it weren't for my dear, sweet Aunt Annie, I'd probably be floating in my own bathtub right this moment.

As usual, the lower classes clog the AVC, trying to rid themselves of all their petty little frustrations. My skin crawling, I push my way through the steaming masses, ignoring the occasional head-turn and gasp of recognition. I still get an infrequent autograph request from those who notice that I look exactly the same as I did thirty years ago when I was the (boy wonder) junior Senator from the Great Corn State.

"When were you last here, sir?" asks the pert, bare-breasted little imp in the ticket booth.

"Two weeks ago."

"May I see your Clinic Card?" I pass it to her, she stamps it, and tells me that I am required by law to return within three months. Law, shit. I helped write that law before this fine, young, pert, bare-breasted imp was even born. (Voted against it, too.)

"Please go right inside, Senator. It's a

privilege to have you visit us."

I ignore her come-on and head inside, still pushing the people out of my way. I find a seat—filthy, full of holes—between an elderly Harlem resident (thank God for the AVC's in that respect) and a young secretary chickie, bare-breasted and long-limbed. A pill is pressed into my hand and I swallow it promptly, leaning back, closing my eyes, waiting for the fantasy.

Annie.

Of course. It's always Annie and I move on the attack, hands filled with knife-hatchet-manacles-gun-club-bang-kill-bang. She rises and floats in front of me, left eye dying, right eye gleaming, and she says something I do not hear.

She flips, turning in the air, her dress falling, revealing the wrinkled flesh of a century and a quarter (almost). The red comes from mouth-nose-throat-left eye and she's still screaming, knowing exactly what she stands for.

The red flows and molds, gleams and spits and there's something inside calling my name. *You've got nothing*, it says, *till I stab you with the truth*.

It's stinking up the air, dripping in my face and soiling my fresh, clean clothes. I scream at Annie, my voice searing my ears, telling her to leave—I've had enough, enough, too much.

Doris Dilby, where are you now that I need a rape fantasy?

Ah, blonde goddess, here you come now, mud bucket gripped tightly in your left hand, eyes bulging with the knowledge of what is to come. The shovel dips into the pail and the mud splats against my nose, bringing howling laughter from a thousand spectators.

White flesh can be black (or green) but the red is the red forever.

Go away.

Get the hell out of my mind. I need to

be alone with my fantastic Doris Dillman images. Can't you see that? What else is left for a broken-down degenerate ex-Senator?

Please.

Two hours later, it's over and the dried-up fantasies drift away in the breeze. I get shakily to my feet and head toward the door, pausing to stomp a scurrying ant.

I can remember it all—every bloody murderous detail, every delicate thrusting rape, every tightening of the rack of screws.

You're not supposed to be able to do that. You're supposed to feel clean inside, non-violent, like a fat angel resting at the left arm of God.

I may be the last individual on this whole planet. I alone have escaped the peaceful curse of the AVC's. Me. The last violent man on earth. Aerial.

"Have a good day," says the pert imp, as I depart. I ignore her, getting into my cab and heading homeward. Even before I hit the front step, I hear the jingle of the phone.

"Aerial, this is Annie. I've been trying to reach you all afternoon. I'm having a full-scale ghost conference at four and I want you there."

"What's up?"

"The Wheatley woman. Her MFW analysis indicates suppressed violent tendencies."

"That's impossible," says the last violent man.

"I'm afraid it's not. Just be sure you're here. This is turning into an extremely delicate case."

I drop the phone and laugh in my pocket, happy for the first time in thirty years. I've told them all along to forget their silly-ass clinics, their pretensions of anti-violence. What have I ever got out of a session except an afternoon of low-grade

thrills? Bad movies, that's all they are, lousy stag movies created from the flotsam of the subject's mind. Anti-violence. Hah. Who are they trying to kid?

I knew there had to be others. I knew I couldn't be alone. The last violent man and now, at last, another.

But—really—Mrs. Ronald R. Wheatley of Brooklyn?

Well, what the hell. We few violent people can't afford to be picky.

Mathew Tests His Sinew:

I have to see the husband. I can't picture Mrs. Wheatley with her blue-blue eyes and all that ugly viciousness buried beneath. It's his fault; I can feel it. The Greater Manhattan Directory has a listing in the lightest of small type: "Wheatley's Books and Mags." I copy the address and hail an aircab.

The shop is old and tiny. Its windows are painted black and the air around it is still. On one side is a large porno-action gallery; on the other, a health food center. I open the door and it squeaks.

Wheatley is alone at the counter. He is around fifty and his face is fat. His gray hair recedes gracelessly past a wrinkled forehead. His eyes stare at me from super-thick spectacles and I search his features for the love-sign I find in everyone (such as, with Mrs. Wheatley, her blue-blue eyes).

I find nothing.

"Can I help you?" he asks, startling me.

"I'm, ah, looking for some books."

"This is a bookstore." When he speaks, he wheezes.

"Some science fiction books, I guess. Do you have any pre-war material?" I am standing on firm ground now, discussing my hobby.

"We've got better than that." On the edge of the counter, he exposes the March 1930 issue of *Wonder Stories*. My eyes glaze as I draw a deep breath.

"Not for sale," he adds, "but we have other items."

I follow him to the rear of the shop. Books surround us, piled to the ceiling, thick with dust. We stop before a large bin.

"Go ahead and look through them, ah—"

"Mathew."

"Ah, yes, Matthew. If you find anything, just bring it to the desk."

I am torn between hobby and duty. As he walks away, I reach into the bin and draw out a paperbound book. I open it and, as I do, it falls apart in my hands, the yellow pages cascading to the floor in clumps of five and ten.

Wheatley spins on his heel and glares at me as I stand holding the cover of the book between thumb and forefinger. It shows a long, thin spaceship hurtling through star-speckled skies. Inside it are a man and a woman. The woman is nude.

"No charge for that," Wheatley says, without the trace of a smile. "These things happen all the time."

"But—but," I start, unable to draw my eyes away from the cover painting. I have to tell him. I can't leave it at this. Total honesty. Yes, that's the only solution.

"I am from Annie Enterprises." My voice is quiet at first, then grows quickly louder. I am losing control. I don't know what I'm saying. "Your wife, she was trying to kill herself and I stopped her and now we find out that she wants to kill you and why are you doing this to her and—"

"Shut up! Who the hell do you think you are, tin man? You can't talk to me that way. Not in my store."

"But it's—"

"Get out! Get out of here before I put a bullet through your goddamned circuits."

I see that he really means it. His eyes are bloated through the distorting lenses. They are threatening, vicious.

I stagger to the street, weak and exhausted. I lean against the door of the porno-action gallery, my breath slapping at my chest. I lift my right hand to wipe away the sweat on my brow. There's something in it. The book cover. Yes, but no. It isn't the same cover, it's—I look at the painting and I scream so loudly that people two blocks away turn and stare, their mouths open, their eyes wide and popping.

I scream again and run—faster, faster—falling in the streets, crashing into walls and people. I stop only when I reach the nearest AVC, where I flash my ticket and rush inside.

Two hours later, I am out, just in time for the big conference. I remember nothing except my love for everybody.

America Sings in Praise of Aunt Annie:

Aunt Annie is a delight and a comfort to us all. Once, when I was just a kid, I wrote her a letter and said I was pregnant (actually I wasn't). She sent a man out right away to fix me up with an abortion. She paid for it and everything. I had to go through with it, even though I wasn't really that way. The doctor took out my appendix and my liver . . . Mrs. L.Q., Los Angeles, Calif.

My wife was trying to raise some flowers around the house and the neighbor children kept coming over and destroying them. I guess they were too young for AVC sessions. We wrote to Aunt Annie immediately and she sent a man the very next day with a bright green plastic fence. It did the trick and our flowers have thrived since. It never would

have happened without Aunt Annie . . . Mr. R.C., Milford, Conn.

Aunt Annie is the greatest person in the world. Without her, this country would fall apart at the seams. She's the only one we can trust . . . Miss B.V., New York, N.Y.

Conference (Annie):

As I sit, mechanically twiddling my thumbs, Mathew comes bustling into the conference room, taking a chair across from Aerial. His face is white and his teeth are clenched tightly.

I say: "Mathew, you're late."

He flicks his eyes around the table, noting the presence of eleven ghosts and Aerial. Then he nods casually in my direction and starts shuffling papers. Something is wrong and I want to help him, having been programmed for that, but I am unable to understand him. Instead, I pound the table with my rubber mallet and call the meeting to order. Thirteen pairs of eyes focus in my direction, twelve attentively, and the thirteenth, Mathew, with vague curiosity.

"No old business today. You've been briefed on the Wheatley case and we're going directly into a study of it. Do you have any questions on what you've heard so far?"

"No, Aunt Annie," eleven times. Aerial looks at the ceiling and Mathew continues his shuffling.

"I'm going to ask Mathew for a report. Mrs. Wheatley lives in his sector and he's talked to her."

Mathew stands, his eyes on the table. Cautiously, he begins to speak and I shut off my direct-hearing. I know what he's going to say and the time can be better spent in thought, in meditation. My problem is not one of knowledge, but of decision making.

Thirty years in this business and I've never yet had to strain a circuit. Everything's run like an Italian electric train and now, suddenly, after all that time, I've got problems galore.

To begin with, there's Mathew for whom my feelings are strong. Annie/Flesh loved him, although she never met him, and I feel a deep affection for him myself. Mathew loves everyone. That's the way he was built. Even another machine can't help but return such love.

The Wheatley case is tearing him apart. The choice—the choice of deciding which of two people to kill—is setting him afire. Poor Mathew. How fortunate for his mechanical sanity that the final decision rests with me. Love is not my province. Compassion is. Murder is not alien to the compassionate mind.

I look at Aerial and his brow is sweating and his jaws are churning. They tell me that he is the blood son of Annie/Flesh. I can find no such recollection in the dense foliage of my Annie/Flesh memories, but I'm willing to accept anything. Something, too, is wrong with Aerial. He is moving closer to a breakdown and the fright within him is growing, preparing to burst.

I am Aunt Annie, the robot with a purpose in life, designed to insure that 150 million Americans retain their sanity. I am their mother and their father, their government and their god. I am the replica of Annie/Flesh, who held the same position for twenty years, and I am carrying her work toward its end.

And that end is within sight. The end is a choice, and the choice is one of death. Either Mrs. Wheatley or her husband must die. It's as simple as that. My compassion circuits fight against rationality. I feel like unscrewing the

ancient flesh of my chest and ripping out each and every one of those circuits. I can't do it, of course. I am meant to suffer. Without suffering, there can be no real decision.

As Mathew drones on, I turn to my ghosts, flashing them smiles of reassurance, even though I do not feel it myself. There is Dizzy—fat, happy Dizzy of the L.A. Sector—dressed in his red burlap robes, his face beaming with permanent joy. Next to him sits Andy of Seattle, our resident intellectual, his forehead creased as he tries to take Mathew's words and multiply them by five. And there's little Mitzi of New Orleans and Duke of Chicago and more, on and on around the table.

They are my ghosts, my lovers, all twelve of them. Is it possible for a mechanical entity to feel the blessings of love? I think it is. I cannot give it, but I can receive it.

Within me, I feel decision expanding. The answer has been there always. At last, I recognize it.

I switch on my hearing, catching the conclusion of Mathew's report. As he finishes, I am ready to join my God.

Conference (Aerial):

I hate listening to Mathew. He chews his words and spits them out in a flat, high-pitched voice that irritates the hell out of me. But I'm fascinated by what he says, especially in his description of this man, this Ronald Wheatley. I have to meet him, even if it means crawling through the doors of his dirty little bookshop. Ronald Wheatley is the answer. I feel that he, too, among us all, knows the supreme beauty of the violent mind. The last violent man plus one.

And these little old ladies would have his head brought before us on a platter.

Their hot, little tears are already running for the bag in Brooklyn. I've lost every other fight in my life, but not this one. I can't afford to. The future of humanity may rest upon the decision of this conference. Aunt Annie, you stupid old gossip, you don't know what you've got yourself into.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.

And, why the hell not? We're going to need a president and who's better qualified than me, Aerial, the last violent man—or should that be the *first* violent man?

I'm the prophet, the living, breathing prophet. I knew it was going to happen. Said so all the time. Didn't I warn them? We don't need a government, they said. What's it for, except to defend us from our enemies? We've got no more enemies. Down with the useless government. Everybody's peaceful. Thomas Jefferson—you're obsolete. Abe Lincoln, go away, we don't need you any more. George Washington, old man, you can still be father, but just keep your hands off the power, okay?

And they were wrong and I was right. It's a joke—don't you see it?—it's a very funny joke. No more enemies, huh? Well, we've got them now, plenty of them. Everybody's their own worst enemy, just like before. It's so goddamned funny I feel like I'm going to split. Hey—why aren't you laughing? Don't you get it?

I take a look around the table and almost puke in my hand. Annie's twelve little hand-maidens, each worse than the last, although none as bad as Mathew. Mathew, the virginal lover. He loves everybody. That's his hang-up. Hah. Well, he's obsolete now. The new president will take care of him and his petty lovemaking.

Mathew shuts up at last and I take a deep breath. Annie catches my eye and I wonder how much she knows. I've underestimated her before, and I've always been sorry. The decision rests with her. Does she know the truth already?

"Aerial, I see you have something to say. Would you like to give us your opinion in this case?"

Would I like to? Hah. The old bag knows the answer to that one. I get to my feet and sweep both sides of the table with my eyes. This is it, I tell myself. This has to be done right. It cannot fail. The future of humanity depends on your next few words.

I take a deep breath, force a smile and begin.

"Early today I learned the facts in the case Mathew has just presented. I recognized its ultimate significance and, at the same time, I reached a personal decision in the matter. In a few moments, I will explain both my decision and the reasons behind it. But, first, I want to cover a little ancient history. It's essential for a full understanding of this case.

"Our country was once a land of violence. Historians are now unanimous in fixing the blame for the Great Last War directly on the shoulders of the American government. In a manner of speaking, we Americans share the blame for the death of every other human being on this planet. Obviously, this is a difficult burden to bear. For the people of the time, it was not only difficult, but very nearly impossible.

"Thus came the development of the Anti-Violence Serum and, with it, the creation of the Anti-Violence Clinic. Within a matter of months, violence had disappeared from American society. At last, we had learned how to live peacefully with ourselves. Unfortunately,

it had taken the deaths of three billion people in order for us to do it.

"I wouldn't go over all this ancient history unless I felt it was essential to the Wheatley case. I think it is. I think it is of the utmost relevancy. I think you see it now. I think the pieces are beginning to fall into place for you as they did for me. Allow me to finish.

"In Mrs. Ronald R. Wheatley, we have an individual who should not exist. We have a violent woman. It does not matter that her violence is directed at herself and not at others. It does not matter that she is unaware of her own condition. One thing, and only one thing, is essential in this case: Mrs. Wheatley is a violent woman. She is a plague carrier.

"I am frightened by this. I think you are, too. Very frightened indeed. But frightened as we are, a decision must be made, a decision that may very well affect the entire subsequent history of man.

"I say: Let her alone. Allow Mrs. Wheatley to take her own life. It is the only way to destroy the danger that she represents, a danger that goes far beyond the danger she presents to herself. This is one instance in which Aunt Annie can best serve humanity by doing nothing. It is the only answer. We must have the courage to carry it out."

Out of breath, I sit, leaning back in my chair and wiping the sweat off my face. I look at Annie first, trying to see whether I have reached her. But she is playing the Great Stone Face.

The rest of them, however, are nodding their heads vigorously. It hurts them to agree, but logic is logic. They know I'm right; they know Mrs. Wheatley must die. It's too bad that they'll never learn why.

Conference (Mathew):

Aerial speaks, making me physically

ill. My joints hurt and my stomach aches. I clutch at my middle, holding it, trying not to vomit.

Love, Aerial, that is the key. After all these years with Annie, haven't you even learned that yet? Don't you understand what all of this is about? You talk logic and we know that logic has no place in love. Everyone in this room knows you for what you are—a fake, a liar, a hater. We all know it, Aerial. You cannot hide it from us. Stop trying. Let us love you; let us help you.

Aerial finishes and triumphantly flicks his eyes around the table. The ghosts nod at him, acting as if they agree, but knowing in their hearts of love that he hasn't said a thing. Aerial is a weak man and a foolish man. We have no wish to hurt him.

It's left up to me. I stand, feeling the ghosts urging me on. My eyes are filled with tears of grief and knowledge. I look at Annie and she smiles at me. Oh, thank God for Annie. I couldn't live without her.

"Aerial is wrong," I say. "He is so completely wrong that I cannot believe that any human being would say what he has just said.

"Annie is here for only one reason—to provide love for those who cannot find it. Once there was Jesus, and he provided the love for the world. But in our wrongness he has been taken away from us and we have only Annie. She is our barrier against the plague of violence. We have no need for death and murder to save us. Our salvation is with us and that salvation is our Annie.

"We are the angels of our own salvation, though we are called ghosts. The devil walks among us and I have seen that devil glaring at me from the blackness of Ronald Wheatley's eyes. I have seen the clear blue-blue of his wife

and I can feel our Annie when I walk in her presence. As you know, it is my burden to love everyone and everything. I love the men and the women, the children and the animals, the rocks and the trees, the lovers and the haters, the . . ."

I can't finish. I fall to the table, burying my face in my hands. Aerial is near and I can feel the foulness of his breath lashing at me with contempt. Sweat pours off my forehead and mingles with the salt of my tears. I look at my hands and see the blood where my fingernails have slashed the flesh of my palms.

Annie is rising, a hand snapping out to silence Aerial's cries. Words of decision come from her lips and I want to know that she is right. It is not easy to bear the load and—

Oh, Annie of my blood and my flesh, may you multiply and cover this great earth with the strength of your spirit.

An Important Event from Annie's Past:

Annie here. I'm the real, living breathing Annie, by the way, the one with the flesh, blood and guts. I'm supposed to be dead, but my memories and soul live on.

Dr. Heinrich wrote (this was thirty years ago) and said he had this invention, this monster, and what should he do with it? Did I have any ideas?

Well, ideas was the name of my game and, at that very moment, I had a very personal requirement for Dr. Heinrich's monster. So, off we went to Wisconsin, me and my lover, Rock, the sportsman and teller of tales.

It was winter and the ground was covered with a thick blanket of snow. We walked toward the distant shack, our feet cutting a neat pattern through the snow. Both of us were dressed to the hilt and all

I could see of Rock was the tip of his big red nose. Ahead of us, smoke billowed from the chimney of the shack and Dr. Heinrich stood on the porch waving at us.

"Heaven is like this, Annie," Rock said. "It's white and it's cold and it's beautiful. Imagine that we're walking together through heaven. We'll turn the snow into a big white cloud and let Dr. Heinrich be a little red angel. The chimney smoke—that's the wrath of God—and the trees—they're signs of peace."

Rock was trying to be both gentle and funny and he knew I loved every minute of it. I planted a kiss on the tip of his nose and we laughed together. For a few moments, I wasn't afraid.

When we reached the shack, Dr. Heinrich shook our hands vigorously. He was a neat, inconspicuous little man with a goatee and a long, white lab coat.

"I'm glad you decided to come, Annie," he said.

"I had very little choice, doctor. You knew that."

He nodded and led us inside. It was cold and I leaned against the stove, warming my hands. It gave me a moment to think and I wished it hadn't. I was eighty-four years old and would be lucky to see one more year. A week ago, my son, Aerial, had returned to me after an absence of twenty years. He'd frightened the hell out of me and I'd put him to work as my chief assistant. I was dying and I couldn't die. No, not until I could be certain that Aerial went before me.

Dr. Heinrich interrupted: "Would you like to see the specimen, Annie?"

I shook my head. "I'm too old to see my own face. Can we do it now?"

"If you want. It's all just as you ordered, programmed for compassion and ready for the entrance of your memories."

"And the other one?"

"The one for love, the one named Mathew?"

I nodded.

"Yes, he's ready, too."

"Good." I moved away from the stove and sat down. "Could you leave us alone for a moment, Dr. Heinrich? I want to discuss my burial with Mr. Rock. Then we'll go right ahead."

Heinrich nodded and backed out of the room.

As soon as he left, I said to Rock, "I can't go through with it."

"I'm glad," he said, with relief.

"But I have to. Aerial. The people. I have no choice."

"Kick Aerial out. Forget the people and worry about yourself."

"Aerial's my son and the people are all I have."

"You have me."

"You're a people, Rock." I smiled.

"Yes, sometimes I forget." He smiled.

I stood and walked back to the stove. I was still wearing my jacket and I was now very warm. It didn't seem to matter—not now.

"Take care of Mathew," I said.

"He's only a machine."

"Take care of him anyway. If you don't, Aerial will destroy him. Annie will need them both."

"I'll do my best," he said.

"Thank you." I kissed his nose again. It was cold.

A few minutes later, Dr. Heinrich reappeared. I followed him into the back room, leaving Rock alone by the stove. I climbed on top of a long wooden table and lay on my back. Dr. Heinrich attached various attachments to my head. The room buzzed and hummed. My eyelids grew heavy.

I floated in the air. Once, when I was a child, I fell out of an old oak tree. The fall

seemed to take forever, even though I was only ten or twelve feet off the ground. While I was in the air, I suddenly realized that I could fly away if I wanted to; but if I did, I would become a bird, forced forever to remain in the sky. I spent hours, suspended in mid-air, trying to reach a decision. At last, I opened my mouth and screamed. Moments later, I struck the ground. I broke my left kneecap and bruised my thighs, but I remained a human being.

Seventy years later, in a cold Wisconsin cabin, I hit the ground again. Annie/Flesh died on top of that wooden table and her memories and soul entered the body and bosom of Annie/Metal. We meshed—transistors and flesh, metal and love—and were one. Again, Aunt Annie.

It was dusk when Annie/Metal and Rock left the shack. They walked through the snow, their footprints digging deep, separated by ten feet of frozen whiteness.

Dr. Heinrich stayed behind and buried the dried bones of Annie/Flesh. Later that day, almost at midnight, Mathew was born. Programmed for love, he opened his eyes and cried.

The Decision of Aunt Annie:

"Ronald Wheatley and his wife must both die. They must equally share the guilt of their violence. I say: Let Mrs. Wheatley kill herself and, when she does, we shall kill her husband. It must be done."

Mathew's Last Psalm:

With the conference over and the decision made, I feel as though I have been freed of an enormous strain. Without a word, I stand and leave. I do not look to the side.

Outside, I pause to stare at the vast, misshapen monolith of the Eastern

American *Daily*. It means nothing. It's just there—all wood and electricity and metal—and I love it. I run from its towering shadow and hail an aircab.

I am going to see Sonny, one of my two best friends, an artist and a confidant. Sonny lives alone in the village. The walls of his apartment are marked with the passing of peace and love. Sonny senses my approach and opens his door to me.

I look down at him and nod a quiet greeting. Sonny is a dwarf, only three and a half feet tall. His long, hairy arms dangle in front of him, his knuckles brushing the floor. His face is covered with a spotty brown beard, thick here, bare there. A perpetual non-cosmetic grin twists his lips. He reminds me of an ape as he crosses the room, shuffling and weaving.

I cross to a table and sit, burying my face in my hands and crying. Sonny sits across from me, drawing with crayons on a thick sheet of brown cardboard.

After a few minutes, I lift my head and ask, "What are you doing?"

Sonny turns the cardboard so that I can see his drawing. It is a city, but like none I have ever seen, vast but not tall. A huge sun glares down at the city and a violent ocean rises in the background. The city is on fire. Flames leap from every building, dancing in shades of red, orange and yellow. The sky is crimson and gray and in the center of it, just to the left of the sun, is the vague outline of a human face.

I am frightened, but I ask: "What is it?"

"Los Angeles. I call it 'The Burning of Los Angeles'. I was born there, you know, and I've always wanted to see it burn." His face twists as he speaks and each word is spit out with force. "I hate the place," he adds, with a shrug.

"Why?"

"Because I was born there, I guess. Because in a world of beauty, no man should be ugly. Because I'm an artist. There are many reasons for burning Los Angeles. I give you only three. You may try to guess more, if you wish."

"I'll think about it," I say, unable to pull my eyes away from the painting. The streets are filled with cars but they seem driverless, unaware of the flames that surround them.

"I'm going to make a movie of it," Sonny says. "There hasn't been a movie completed in fifty years, but this is going to be the first. I'll build a vast scale model of Los Angeles, probably on Staten Island. I'll get my cameras and, as it burns, I'll film it. I have to see it happen. These paintings can only be guesswork."

"Paintings? You mean, you have more?"

He reaches in a drawer and pulls out another dozen cardboard sheets. He passes them to me and I look. All show the same scene of the burning city. The only thing that changes from painting to painting is the face in the sky. In some, it is smiling; in others, frowning. In the last, it is crying. I like that one best.

"That's the one thing I can't predict," he says, pointing at the sobbing face. "You can never guess what God will do. I guess that's why he's God."

I tell him about Annie.

"She's God," he says with certainty. "In another painting, I substituted her face for that of Jesus on the cross. It fit."

"I think she's God, too," I say, tearing my eyes away from the face in the sky. "I didn't know it until now."

"Her decision makes sense in that light, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"It makes sense because it doesn't make any sense at all. That's the way God

works."

"I nod, sigh, stand, and walk away. Behind me, Sonny sings as he paints. I turn and throw him a kiss.

The Sad Death of Ronald Wheatley:

Ronald Wheatley sat alone in his bookshop, surrounded by dust and age. He picked up a broom and walked toward the back of the store. He raised the broom and killed a fat spider.

He threw the broom away and walked to the science fiction section. He dumped the bin of books on the floor and began separating them by author. When he'd finished, he alphabetized them and tossed them back in the bin. He went to the main desk and prepared a sign. He walked back to the science fiction section and placed the sign above the book bin. It said: "SF—2 for 5¢."

He locked the front door and pulled down the shade. He went back to the science fiction section and dropped a nickel in the bin. He removed two paperbound books. The first had a spaceship on the cover. It was lifting off from earth and the American continents were highlighted in the background. Wheatley opened the second book and began to read. It had a large, skinny robot on the cover. The robot was strangling a young girl.

For an hour, Ronald Wheatley read the book. Slowed by frequent glances at his watch, he finished half of it. At the end of the hour, the phone rang.

Wheatley lifted the receiver and listened. He nodded frequently and said nothing. He dropped the receiver and picked up his book. He read for another hour and finished the book.

He stood and stretched, reaching toward the high ceiling. He picked up both books and tossed them into the bin.

Then he walked over and retrieved his nickel.

There was a knock on the door.

Ronald Wheatley waited, leaning slightly forward, listening attentively. There was another knock. A hand gripped the doorknob and shook it.

Wheatley walked forward and opened the door. A hand struck him in the chest, shoving him back. He fell to the floor. Nine men and two women formed a circle around him. The last one through the door, a big man in red burlap robes, locked it and dropped the shade.

"You're from Aunt Annie?" Wheatley asked them.

"Yes," they said, all eleven of them, in unison.

"I knew you were coming. One of you visited my wife. There was a man at the store today."

Eleven heads nodded.

"My wife's dead. She killed herself."

"We know."

"You're going to kill me?"

"There's no other way."

"Are you sure? It's not my fault."

"We're sure. Ask Aunt Annie."

"It's too late for that. She never answers my letters."

"The phone started ringing."

The Testament of Aunt Annie:

I give them my decision and rush them out of the office. I have no more time. I must prepare for the end.

The Wheatleys are the beginning of the end and I, Aunt Annie, am the end of the beginning. The treatment is wearing off; man is developing an immunity. I should have seen it before. Aerial was our harbinger. It never worked on him, perhaps because he knew it wouldn't, perhaps because he was an exceptionally violent man. The reasons don't matter,

not for Aerial, not for the Wheatleys, not for mankind.

Next week, there will be a dozen more. In a month, a hundred. Within a year, two years, everyone will be immune.

Man destroyed a part of himself and to insure that he wouldn't do it again, he willingly sacrificed his humanity. It was a bad decision, an easy one. Now it is time to move on again. The peace of the last few years couldn't have lasted. It shouldn't have lasted. And it didn't.

"Mr. Blackwell," I say to the beeper. "Give the ghosts time to reach the Wheatley Bookstore. Then, I want you to call them and tell them to leave him alone."

"We've received word that Mrs. Wheatley killed herself this morning."

"How?"

"An overdose of pills."

"That's too bad. I'm sorry." (But I'm not.)

I straighten up my desk, papers here, letters there. Tomorrow's column, my last, is ready for the printer. I take out my will and lay it where it can be easily found. "Dear Uncle Matt." I like the sound of it; I think he can handle the job. Aerial can take it away from him if he wants. But I don't think he will, not in the new post-Annie America. There will be too many challenges for a man like Aerial to be satisfied with a silly old lady's newspaper column. He will let Mathew have it. There will be bigger fish for Aerial.

There are so many things I wish I could have accomplished before the end. It crept up on me so suddenly. I didn't even recognize it, not until just a few short hours ago. Aerial saw it coming before all of us. But he always did have a quick mind.

Humanity, I'm about to give you your

humanity back. What greater gift can a machine give a man?

Anti-violence, good-bye. We don't need you any more. We've got ourselves.

I walk out the door and say to Mr. Blackwell: "I'm going uptown. Hold any calls."

"Yes, Aunt Annie." He is boiling with curiosity. I've never left the building, not in thirty years. Even before me, Annie/Flesh seldom ventured outside.

Rock is at his desk. I lean over his shoulder, reading his column as he types it.

He turns. "Hello, Annie. Haven't seen you in a long time."

"Hello, Rock." And, after a pause, "I remember you."

"I wondered if you did."

"I do."

I leave him at the typewriter, down the elevator, and into the street. I pause for a final look at the monolithic structure of the Eastern American *Daily*. I wave at it. I throw it a kiss.

The streets are filled with people, rushing here, rushing there. As I pass, heads turn in recognition. I walk showily as people begin to follow.

It's a hot day. I pull off my shawl and drop it in the street. Two men fight over it. That pleases me. It's happening already and I'm glad.

Hello, Annie. It's a voice—inside.

Hello, Annie, I reply, in kind. *Are you leaving me?*

I must. I have to try to find the rest of me.

Good luck.

The same to you. You've done a good job.

You think I picked the right course?

The only course.

And then she's gone. I search my mind, finding it free of Annie/Flesh. She was

there all along, waiting, watching, listening. Somehow. I knew it.

The AVC looms ahead. I smile at the ticket girl. At first, she fails to recognize me.

"Can I see your card, please?"

"I don't have one."

"Then you must be—"

"I am."

Inside and darkness. I smell the people sweating off their hate and their lust. I push my way through them until I stand at the front. Annie, one lone woman, standing against them all.

"*I am here,*" I yell. Once, then again.

Two thousand pairs of eyes stare at me as two thousand separate fantasies collapse. Four thousand eyes, some with recognition, some without.

"Kill me," I say, quietly. "That's what you're here for, isn't it? Kill me."

No response. Puzzlement.

"You *must*."

Still, no action.

"It's all part of your fantasy. Go ahead. I'm not real."

And they move. Four thousand feet slapping against wooden floors, rushing toward the front. I can almost smell their thoughts, screaming and swearing.

They tear away my arms and my legs. My body is opened and transistors, wires, components are strewn across the floor. I drop, twisting and rolling.

I feel no pain for death has no pain for me. I'm a light switch. I'm not dying. I'm merely being switched off.

"Thank you," I tell them, as I die. "Thank you for doing this for me."

And it's over. And I'm dead. At last.

Annie lived only to die and then live and die again.

Again, Aunt Annie.

The Last Words of . . .

Aerial: She thought she could pull it off, thought she could show them that they were nothing but a pack of filthy dogs. Well, they saw it, all right. They saw the circuits and the transistors and the beeping red lights. They saw it and they weren't fooled. They knew she wasn't a god. Oh, no, they knew her for exactly what she was—a robot, a pseudo-woman, some electronic nightmare out of James Whale.

And, now, it's breaking down, falling to

And, now, it's breaking down, falling to the immunity spreads farther and farther. The viciousness of her death has closed every AVC in the New York Sector. All I've got to do is stick around and wait. When it's all over, I'll pick up the pieces and it'll all be mine.

I've even got my program ready. The stars—that's what it is. Man is too goddamned good to keep on living on this filthy, burned-out planet. We've been up to the Moon and over to Mars and around Venus. We've got nothing left but the stars and that's exactly where we're heading.

Let Mathew have his column. I sure as

hell don't want it. The stars. When I say the word, I can see them sitting up there, just waiting for us. The stars.

And Mathew: I have witnessed the glory and I deem myself fortunate to have lived during its passing. I have seen the One die and I have seen the One live again. I have been the faithful apostle and I shall spread the word from my pulpit, from the pages of "Dear Uncle Matt."

Oh, yes, we have all seen what love can do when it is allowed to flow freely. We have seen that violence is not the province of mankind, that it is not inevitable that he die by his own hand. We have seen it all and we have understood.

The stars beckon to us and we shall follow their path to heaven. We must leave our world of death and fly to the stars of life. Only the stars are real; that much we know.

Come, please, all of us, we must begin the walk together. We may never arrive, but our children's children's children shall. It is enough that we began.

I have seen the glory and I know.

—Gordon Eklund

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Sol Cohen, Publisher

THE FREEDOM FIGHTER

RAY RUSSELL

Pornography is now being published openly in this country, and the television industry is wondering what it will do with the current batch of movies from Hollywood. Broadway, in the meantime, is cashing in on complete nudity and simulated sex before live audiences. It's hard to believe that this could all become institutionalized, but Ray Russell offers a short and pungent fable on the theme . . .

I KNEW I WAS IN trouble again when Maurie's secretary, Joan, called to ask if I could see Maurie this afternoon, and would two o'clock be convenient. Maurie usually calls me himself. But when it's bad news, he communicates through Joan. And she didn't even call me Helen—she called me Miss Lansing.

I told her sure, two would be fine. The click, as she hung up, had the finality of a guillotine blade striking home, and I could see my blonde head plopping into the basket.

Of course, it isn't the first time my head has been on the block. As one of the few really *big* female film directors, I've been a dartboard for every running-scared male megaphoner in Hollywood. Ever since I broke out of Sarah Lawrence, with my hand-held camera slung over one shoulder and my purse over the other, the male-supremacy boys have been afraid of me. I was a threat to them, they thought, Peck's Bad Girl, a smarty-pants chick from a classy school, who'd doubled in brass (and they *did* mean brass!) as a fashion model and a shooter of some of the liveliest *cinema verite* footage ever to surface from the underground.

I guess they'd expected me to be a tough bull dyke, and I was tough all right, but I was never the other. Maurie had found that out soon enough. He was my agent when I first came to Hollywood back in 1971, and in the five years since then he'd been the producer of all my films. He'd also been my lover—not quite exclusively—right from the start. And my protector, I'll have to admit it. I wouldn't have needed a protector if I'd been a failure—but things can get pretty rough in this town for a *successful* Girl Director.

And now, Maurie was sharpening the axe and taking a good long look at my *haute couture* neck. Maybe I have it coming. You can buck the Establishment just so long, but they get you in the end. They always do. They always have. They always will. I've been on borrowed time for a long, long while, and now the handwriting is on the wall. But I can't complain—I've had quite a run for my money.

(Funny, isn't it, how the cliches bunch up in moments of crisis.)

I put on my sheerest see-through, got in the car, and took the long way to the studio—Sunset to La Cienega, then

straight down to Venice Boulevard. The scenic route, full of quaint relics of the old days, the golden era, before my time. Schwab's. Dino's. The Playboy Club. The Losers. Ollie Hammond's, where you can still get that steak-and-baked-spaghetti platter of theirs twenty-four hours a day. All the antiques. I may never see them again.

Reactionary. That's what some of them have been calling me. To others, I'm a dangerous rebel, a threat to The American Way Of Life. I feel like neither of those extremes. I just want to make good pictures. But when you fight city hall, as I've been doing, I guess that does make you a rebel of a kind. And when you react to the status quo, maybe that makes you a reactionary. Well, I've certainly been reacting.

Joan was brisk, courteous, and distant—just as she had been on the phone. I sailed past her with a wave.

Maurie's office was the same (the Oscars on the sideboard, the plaques on the wall, the Chagall that stamped him a man of taste), but Maurie was not the same. Maurie was nervous. Even so, he got straight to the point, not even bothering to rise from behind his desk. He's always been a direct person.

"I guess you know why you're here," he said.

"I guess."

"I can't cover for you anymore, honey. This time you've really torn it."

With some ceremony, I sat down, and flicked an imaginary mote of lint from my skirt before I quietly said, "You've been looking at my rough cut."

"I have. Thereby violating the non-interference clause in your contract."

"I forgive you."

"Don't get cute, darling. I've been looking at your rough cut, yes. And I must say—" He broke off and started again. "Damn it, what is it with you? Have you got a martyr complex? Why can't you toe the mark like every other director? Just because you're a girl, with those big blue eyes and that great shape, you think you can—"

"Hold it right there, sugar," I cut in. "I'm not having any of that. You know damn well I've never traded on my femininity that way."

"All right, all right, I'm sorry."

"Maurie darling, I know you're having a difficult time trying to say what you're trying to say. Why not cool the ritual dance and give it to me the hard way? I'm a big girl now. I can take it."

Maurie got very tight-lipped. "You want it the hard way, you'll get it the hard way. You're off the picture. As of right now. I'm putting Bill Gahagan in charge."

"Best lap dog in town."

"Lap dog, maybe. But he'll give me a picture I can release!"

"You've released quite a few of mine, lover."

"Sure. *And* fronted for you, *and* made apologies for you, *and* took your lumps for you. But I can't do it anymore, baby. I can't cop a plea with Freedom Of Speech anymore, or Artistic Liberty, or Creative Prerogative. No. It's gone way beyond that. It's not just the front office I have to fight now. Them I can handle. The civic groups are on my neck. The parents associations. The *government!* Your last picture was picketed in all the big cities. They're calling you a degenerate, a corrupter of children, God knows what else. And as for this new picture..."

"Yes?" All innocence, I was. Couldn't imagine what he was getting at. Like hell

I couldn't.

Maurie's voice took on an elegiac throb. "I sat down there," he said in Hammond organ tones. "I sat down there," he repeated, "in the projection room, and watched every foot of film you shot, every *frame*. And frankly, Helen, I was shocked. I honestly don't see how it can be salvaged. Unless..."

I saved him the trouble. "Unless I see the light. Play ball. Make ... 'certain changes'..."

His tone now became soft, conciliatory. "A scene here, a shot there, a *slightly* different camera angle somewhere else. I'm not asking for much, dear. Really I'm not."

"Sorry, Maurie. Let the lap dog do it."

"*All right! I will!*" Then he softened again. "But I don't want to. I want *you* on the film, not a lap dog."

I smiled a sad little smile and shook my head and very gently said, "You don't want me. You want a revised and edited version of me."

"I want a *realistic* version of you. I want a You that is not bound and determined to commit career suicide. No, sit down. Don't go. Listen to me for a minute. Please. You owe me. Like the politicians say, let's look at the record."

"All right. Let's."

"Want a Scotch-and-water? Good. I could use one myself."

He got up and walked over to the bar, and I noticed he was wearing one of those new padded codpieces, lemon yellow, trimmed in red. But no sequins or clever mottos—Maurie's always been a conservative.

While he poured, he talked. "It's the love scenes, of course. That's all. Everything else is fine. It's really a very beautiful picture. But those love scenes! Wow!" He shook his head in disbelief as

he handed me the glass.

"Those love scenes," he repeated. "Every time the boy and girl get together, it happens. They meet. They kiss. They talk a little. Then they go into a bedroom. Close the door. Kiss again. Sink onto the bed. And *then!*" Maurie took a deep slug of his drink. "*And then you dissolve!*"

I sipped my drink and said, "Why not? Why state the obvious? Why not let the audience use its imagination? What the hell do you *think* they're going to do on that bed—play Scrabble?"

Maurie sighed and closed his eyes. Long-suffering Maurie. "Do I have to deliver a sermon? A lecture? Do I have to remind you of the long, hard battle fought by this industry over the years—and not only this industry, the publishing industry, too, television, the legit stage—the battle against Puritanism, Victorian prudishness? Freedom fighters, that's what we were!"

"So am I, Maurie."

"*Sure you are!*" he said, sarcastically. "You fight freedom!"

My mind wandered. I recalled something Eric Hoffer once wrote: *It is doubtful whether the oppressed ever fight for freedom. They fight for pride and for power—power to oppress others. They want to retaliate.* Meanwhile, Maurie was still talking. "Time was," he said, "when we couldn't show Blondie and Dagwood reading side by side in the same bed! You want us to return to *those* days?"

"No, of course not, but—"

"But what? Are you trying to say you know better than the church groups and the parents associations about what's best for kids? You don't even *have* any kids, but I'm a divorced man, I know! And let me tell you something, Miss Iconoclast, Miss Free-Thinking

Revolutionary—I am *grateful* for the progress that has been made in this country. I am *thankful* for the legislation that has been passed to protect my children from those who tell them their bodies are *evil*, that sex is *dirty*.”

“Maurie, you of *all* people must know I don’t consider sex dirty—”

“Then why don’t you show it, like everybody else? See? You can’t answer me! When you shoot a restaurant scene, do you dissolve just as your characters sit down to the table? No—you don’t. And why? I’ll tell you why. Because the act of eating isn’t dirty to you. But sex is. Obviously! So you avert your eyes—and not only *your* eyes, but the eyes of the young, impressionable people of this country. You force them to wear blinkers. You deprive them. You give them a false image of human relationships. You throttle their natural instincts. You put a fig leaf on the fountain of life!”

“That’s a great image—do you mind if I write it down?”

“This is no time for wisecracks, Helen. This is *serious*.”

“I know it’s serious,” I said. “More serious than you could possibly imagine. But let me try to get through to you in a way even you might understand. Money, Laurie. Box office receipts. Grosses. Your kind of picture made money at first, I can’t deny, but business has fallen off, the people are beginning to stay home, they’re watching *The Late Show*, and you want to know why?”

“I have a hunch you’re going to answer that question yourself,” said Laurie.

“I am—with another question. Think back, Laurie. To when you were a kid. What kind of picture really turned you off? What kind of picture did the kids stay away from in droves—unless their parents *made* them go? Wasn’t it the kind

of picture obviously calculated to please kids? In the same way, Laurie, the adults are being turned off by pictures obviously calculated to please adults. I repeat: no matter what you say, I do *not* consider sex dirty. I just don’t think it’s artistically necessary or valid to show every detail on the screen. Or on the stage. Or in the novel. In fact, I consider most of my pictures intensely *sexual* in theme—honest stories about the love between men and women—”

“Ah!” Laurie barked in triumph. “Men and women! That’s another thing! *Discrimination*. What world do you live in, sweetie? Don’t you know we’ve been striving to *integrate* our pictures? Not only cast-wise, but theme-wise, as well? And yet look at the pictures you’ve been turning out in the past five years. Just look at them. How many of them have dealt with homosexuality? Lesbianism? Bestiality? Fetishism? Sadism? Masochism? I’ll tell you how many. *Not one!* That’s how many!”

“Laurie...”

“Don’t Laurie me! So not only do I have the parents and the church types breathing down my neck, I also have all the minority lobbies, all the pressure groups—all the fags and dykes and kinkos—every one of them screaming for your blood! Not only are you a degenerate, you’re a bigot!”

He slammed down his glass. Scotch spilled all over his desk. “And when I ask you to make a few trivial changes in the picture, put in a few short scenes, change a camera angle so as not to conceal nudity—you refuse. Let the lap dog do it, you tell me: *To me* you say that. All right. The lap dog *will* do it. And you are *through*, lady. T-H-R-U, through!”

I didn’t take the same route back to my apartment. I had already had the tour of

nostalgia; now I explored the hard realities of the present.

I deliberately drove past L'Exhibition, the club where in-the-flesh sex acts are publicly performed; past Gay Blade, the homo haberdashery built in the shape of a giant erection; past all the other In spots—Cock 'N' Ball and Pussy In Boots and Suck-You-Lent Snacks and Fladg-Elation and Club 69 and the Orgasm-West Hotel; past a newsstand selling the updated *Tarzan and Jane* comic books; past the venerable Chinese Theatre, where the cement, they say, used to display merely the footprints of the stars, but which has moved with the times; past the stately Pantages, where the Oscar-winning historical satire, *Victoria Vagina*, is playing (the car radio was treating me to a medley of the current hits: *Finger in the Dyke* and *Whipped Scream* and *It Was Hard When I Kissed Him Goodbye*, and so on, sung by that new group, The Groin Gobblers ... I switched it off)...

And as I drove, I thought about my

future. It would have to be Europe, I supposed. There, in Paris, or maybe Rome, I might escape. Others had done it, artist-expatriates in self-imposed exile from conformity. Bob Morgan, for instance, who quit his publisher when they tried to force him to include a homincestuous child-molesting scene in his latest novel (a French paperback house finally published it his way); Sue Pevner, the songwriter who refused to wrate a four-letter lyric for a Broadway musical; Joe Janssen, who started a fist fight with the producer who inserted a defecation scene in his play. They're all there, quietly working, hoping, biding their time, waiting for the day when they can return, victorious, honored for their courage. Yes, there I'll find kindred spirits, brother-and-sisters-in-arms, fearless allies in the war against the censors.

If they haven't revoked my passport, that is.

—Ray Russell

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53)

was faintly pink with dawn. Behind, it was faintly red with fire of pine-needles ignited by the rockets. It seemed to Fafhrd that the north wind brought the roaring of flames.

He shouted, "Gnamph Nar, Mlurg Nar, great Kvarch Nar—we'll see them all! All the cities of the Forest Land! All the Land of the Eight Cities."

Beside him Vlana stirred warm under his embracing arm and took up his cry with, "Sarheenmar, Ilthmar, Lankhmar! All the cities of the south! Quarmall! Horborixen! Slim-spired Tisilimilit! The

Rising Land!"

It seemed to Fafhrd that mirages of all those unknown cities and places filled the brightening horizon. "Travel, love, adventure, the world!" he shouted, hugging Vlana to him with his right arm while his left slapped the horses with the reins.

He wondered why, although his imagination was roaringly aflame like the canyon behind him, his heart was still so cold.

—Fritz Leiber

mundane critics passing judgement on our entire field).

If I had to boil these two standards down into single words, I'd label them "story" and "style." And if I had to put my finger on the largest cause for dissention among most people when they get together to discuss their favorite stories, I'd say it was a confusion of these two very differing sets of standards.

Too often when we speak of "good" stories and "bad" stories, what we mean is, the story was or wasn't one of a type we like. Too often we criticise a story for not being of an entirely different sort. This is basically unfair to the author and the story, of course.

When I reject stories, those which require the most agonizing on my part are those which I *almost* like. And these fall into two broad categories. The first are the well-written stories with no guts. They are told in at least adequate prose—and sometimes a good deal more than that—but they are empty of life, of involvement. Somehow, one doesn't *care* what happens in the story. Its characters are manikins who walk through their staging but never come alive—or its plot is simply uninteresting, one without conflict or resolution. This is the hardest kind of story to reject, because it demands of an editor that he second-guess the author, that he presume upon the fact that since *he* didn't respond to the story that his readers won't either, and the author was lacking. Sometimes one makes the wrong decision and realizes it only by hindsight.

The alternative category is that story which has a powerful theme and begs to be told, but which is inadequately written. And this can be equally agonizing to reject, because while one responds to the emotional intensity of the story, one must set standards for prose in

a magazine below which a story is not acceptable. Many of the stories published two or more decades ago reflect these lower standards: the writing was often rudimentary, but the author's story sense carried the day. Today our standards—for the entire field—are higher; we are, as readers, more sophisticated. Yet, it can hurt when I've been forced to make that choice on a story which straddles the difficult line. I can, of course, return it with suggestions for a rewrite, but so often the author was already doing the best he could, and what I want is simply beyond him. (From the author's point of view this kind of rejection can be damnably frustrating—as I know from first-hand experience.)

Most writers, of course, will not run to quite those extremes. Every writer has his strong and his weak points; a good word-sense (even a sense for the poetic) or a sure touch for the strong plot. The best combine both to varying degrees. That's why we keep coming back to them as the pillars of our field.

My problem—and one of which I am constantly aware—is that my tastes may be too sophisticated—even jaded. I have been reading in this field for the past twenty years, and for the first ten of those science fiction and fantasy were the staples of my reading diet. (At the height of the sf magazine "boom" in the early fifties, with over forty titles being published, I read them *all*. The thought staggers me now . . .) It is an accepted fact that the majority of the people who read sf and fantasy pass through our field, growing into and out of it in some two- to five years. Many encounter sf while still in the process of becoming adults; it becomes part of their total learning process, but suffers the fate of becoming just another "phase." The first time

you—or anyone—encounters an idea in a story, it will seem fresh and even exciting, imbuing the story with that freshness, and enhancing it with a special place in your memory. But the next time around will be less special, and so on for each encounter until the idea as such will mean little and you will look for other values in the story.

By now, most of the “ideas” *per se* have been used a number of times in sf stories; very few are genuinely new and fresh and therefore exciting. I know that. But if you just picked up this issue of FANTASTIC and it’s your first journey into these worlds, you and I will see very different things in the stories herein. I envy you that—your eyes are fresh and mine are not—but it is my job to put together a magazine which will not only excite you on first encounter, but satisfy you on each return, issue after issue, year—hopefully—after year.

Some editors—sadly, even in this magazine’s past—knowing that their tastes are probably different from those of their readers, “edit down” to what they, in their omniscience, believe their readers want. They buy stories for which they hold contempt, safe in their cynical belief that these are the sort of stories that will sell their magazine. Such editors inevitably hurt their magazines—ultimately the contempt seeps through—and the magazines (as well as the entire field) suffer for it. Such editorial policies, under former publishers, are largely responsible for the uneven reputations of FANTASTIC and AMAZING STORIES—a fact those editors wished upon us who have followed, and with which we must live and overcome.

I refuse to do it. I will not condescend. For better or worse, I feel I must rely upon my own taste, and I’m not convinced that

standards can be “too high” in any case.

So where do my tastes lie? I’ve talked around the subject, but you can infer from the foregoing that I am concerned with both story and style, and that ideally I want the best of both. I will settle for less equal proportions when I feel a story’s virtues outweigh its weaknesses. Given a basic choice, I prefer a good story competently told to a poor story brilliantly told. My taste in story types is catholic. As I’ve mentioned in previous editorials, picking nits over story-categories is not for me.

If I have a bias, it is in favor of good characterization. I want stories with emotional content: stories involving real people about whom I can *care*. Good characterization supplies the edge, I think, between the ho-hum story and the one which wins a Hugo or Nebula. It is in the area of increasingly good characterization that our entire field has shown the greatest real growth in recent years, ballyhoo for New Waves to the contrary notwithstanding.

And when we disagree, you and I, it will most likely be because you don’t like the *kind* of story that a particular piece turns out to be. Some of you, for instance, disliked Lin Carter’s “A Guide to the City” in our October issue precisely *because* it was unlike the swashbuckling stories you have come to expect of Lin—although I warned you of that in the blurb. (On the other hand, others among you have written to say that you can’t stand Lin’s space-operas and adventure sagas, but you loved this particular story.)

Most of the likes and dislikes expressed in your letters—particularly the dislikes—seem to boil down to this sort of criticism: you didn’t like that *type* of story. Obviously I can’t meet all your varied likes and dislikes in a single issue

or 100% of the time. But what I can do, will do, and am doing, is to be certain that no matter what type of story from the broad fantasy spectrum you find here, it will be well-written and will meet my own high standards in that regard. You'll find no hack-work stories here, none obviously written for the buck and nothing more. I don't buy stories by the yard. Each and every story—whether you like it or not—will be a story that I am convinced was written because the author wanted to write it, and wanted to write it the way it was written. And that's a guarantee.

The task of selecting the Fantasy Classic for each issue is peculiarly demanding, because standards *have* changed and matured so greatly over the years. For that reason we aren't pretending to seek stories which meet today's standards—a story is, after all, a product of its own times and the thinking of those times—but rather the “period pieces” still of value when judged on their own terms.

Last issue we added a new name to our masthead. Arnold Katz, who has been a well-known and popular fan throughout the last decade, has now been given the task of wading through our bound volumes of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES in search of our Fantasy Classics. Since I've never had the time to do an adequate job of it, I have heaved a great sigh of relief and willingly passed the buck.

This issue of FANTASTIC also boasts two other innovations, one of which is obvious: we've returned to original cover paintings. I'm pleased as hell that our first is by Jeff Jones, an artist whose work I very much admire. Forthcoming covers will be by some of the younger up-and-coming artists like Larry Todd, and semi-

pros like Eddie Jones, who could easily be a full-time professional artist if he wished. (Harlan Ellison, after seeing Eddie's paintings, vowed to write stories around them. “Done!” I cried. You'll see them here.)

The other innovation involves your letters:

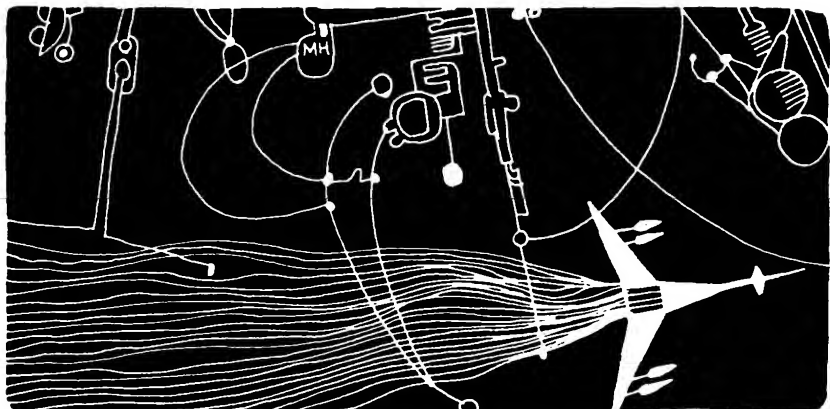
In the short time since we began publishing your letters here again, the letter column has swelled into a raging beast. While once I could fit every letter that came in into its pages, now I must carefully edit and only a representative selection make it into print.

Obviously, this is unfair. Most of you wrote with the expectation that *your* letter *would* be published. My compromise solution—for all of you whose letters are squeezed out of any given issue—is something I call Reader Feedback.

It's not new with me—some fanzine editors have been doing it for years—but I believe that FANTASTIC (and AMAZING) are the first professional sf magazines to do it. And here's what I do: After each issue's letter column is made up, I go through the remaining letters and sort them into piles depending upon the stories and authors commented upon. (When a letter mentions more than one story, I clip it apart.) Then each batch of comments on each story is mailed directly to its author for him to read. In this way, each author receives direct Reader Feedback from you. Your comments are not lost, but will reach those people most concerned. You can count on the fact that now, more than ever, your letter, even if not published, will be read with interest by all hands.

All the more reason for you to keep writing!

—Ted White



FANTASY BOOKS

SOME OF THE LADIES

Reviewed by Fritz Leiber

Daughters of Earth, by Judith Merrill, Doubleday & Co., 1969, 256 pp., hardcover, \$4.95

Readers who came to science fiction during the past dozen years likely think of Judith Merrill only as a successful and highly capable anthologist. Save for a few fleeting paperbacks, they have had little or no opportunity to see and judge her own stories in the field. Now at last we have under one hard cover her two best short novels, *Homecalling* and *Project Nursemaid*, and a third, *Daughters of Earth*, which although it provides a handy book title, is marred chiefly by the original publisher's Twayne's—mistaken notion that interesting science fiction could be created by having three authors, each in his own story, fictionalize on a predetermined science situation: in this case two alien planets, one with a fluorine chemistry, the other with a

silicon one, each differing sharply with the familiar hydrocarbon chemistry of Earth. The fatal flaw in such a scheme is that the creative core of a good science-fiction story is the birth together of situation, characters, and science elements. A fairly competent template or series story—say a Doc Savage or John Carter novel—can be written by any number of qualified and enthusiastic or merely hungry authors, because the birth has already taken place and all that is asked for is a rebirth. But to set an author to work on only characters, situation, or science elements is like expecting an examination paper in psychology, sociology, or physics to turn out as fiction. It can be a useful pedagogical device in a writing workshop, but little more. At this point all the professional author can usually do is dodge the problem, by making the predetermined science situation merely incidental to the story (extreme example: a spaceship in the story sights fluorine and silicon planets

and avoids them), exactly as many an author has done in writing a story around a magazine cover illustration. With characteristic honesty, Merrill tries to solve the problem and largely fails, though even in this tale she gives us a powerful and feelingful picture of the female generations of a family pioneering planets farther and farther away from Earth.

Project Nursemaid, about the colonization of the Moon, and *Homecalling*, which concerns the adoption of two human children into a termitelike culture and their surmounting of severe early traumas, succeed because they are entirely Merrill's stories and because they are based on strong and deep human feelings. The latter story contains an interesting stylistic device, the narration of the thoughts of two characters in parallel columns, which does much to render plausible the psionic or telepathic element in the story.

An insistence on stories with compelling and genuine feelings, stories that at some crucial point relate to life as it really is, accounts for Merrill's great ability as an anthologist and the drawing of more and more outside readers to her "Year's Best" volumes. As fine an anthologist as the late Anthony Boucher would rather often select stories that were merely amusing, entertaining, or clever. Another competent one, John Campbell, can be drawn to stories simply by their technological novelties and idea content. Merrill has almost never been satisfied with that little, though of late with the growth of her taste for avant garde writing, she has occasionally been drawn to stories that are feelingful, but obscure and with little overt science-fiction content.

Merrill is a person of strong faiths,

convictions, and commitments—though she has been as quick as the next editor to reject the story that is merely "message," protest, or propaganda. Over the years these faiths have not changed essentially, but they have grown, branched, and merged. Foremost has always been her faith in the ability and ultimate willingness of intelligent, feelingful beings, human or otherwise, to communicate, empathize, and relate constructively—opposed, say, to what I imagine to be Robert Heinlein's conviction that even with the best understanding in the universe, some races of beings will never forgive or get together.

Merrill's primal faith comes out strongly in the novel *The Tomorrow People* and such shorts as "The Lady Was a Tramp"—the relations of humans with humans—and in *Homecalling* and "Wherever You Are"—about the overcoming of human dread of aliens. Secondary only to it is her faith in extrasensory perception, which could be of such vast help in cementing and accelerating the union of beings. More common to all science-fiction writers is her faith in man's ability to reach the stars, likewise her commitment to the duty to warn humanity against the perils of atomic warfare, fallout, and radiation. This led to the short story that made her reputation—"That Only a Mother"—about a repulsively mutated baby, and also to the highly realistic and well-researched novel, *The Shadow on the Hearth*, about the atomic bombing of New York City told from the viewpoint of a suburban housewife and her children. Criticized by some in-groups at the time because it did not involve highly novel scientific extrapolations—nor was it by any means an atomic doom story, for that

matter—it in retrospect emphasizes the need for more stories giving a well-balanced appraisal of today's scientific, technological, and military potential.

At present Merrill's faith has grown to include one in the avant garde and the generation of protest, resulting in the stories of the "New Wave," which unfortunately seldom respect Merrill's own equal respect for human feeling and scientific fact and often go off into symbolisms and artificial psychic constructions foreign to her own basic way of thought. This is the result of her constant seeking, but one can hope that now she will begin to do some of the seeking in her own stories again, rather than solely in those of others.

Jirel of Joiry, by C.L. Moore, Paperback Library, 1969, 175 pp., paperback, 60 cents

Catherine Moore was writing science fiction and fantasy a few years before Judith Merrill, though under initials noncommittal as to sex. Today her five Jirel novelettes seem a kind of essence of the magazine *Weird Tales* at its best: sword and sorcery, strange gray or jeweled worlds of wonder that now can be viewed as inner space, and symbolisms the stronger for being likely unconscious. There are strains of Abe Merritt, Robert Howard, and even H. P. Lovecraft!—"There was something queer about the angles of those curves. She was no scholar in geometry or aught else. But she felt intuitively that the bend and slant of the way she had went were somehow outside any other angles or bends she had ever known."

As for Howard, Jirel is a female Conan, a Joan of Arc who leads in secular battles the warriors of her medieval stronghold, opening gaps for them in hostile ranks by the sheer fury of her fighting—"a

shouting battle-machine from which Guisard's men reeled in bloody confusion as she whirled and slashed and slew." She curses freely. "The yellow blaze of her eyes held fury as a crucible holds fire." Even, "Many loves had blown lightly through her life."

So Jirel is generally pictured in the opening of each novelette. But then in search of a magical revenge or release, she is swiftly transported into some eerie other-world where she becomes much more the primal woman driven by a love that weighs heavily instead of blowing lightly, struggling against fears and frailties, facing visions of sharp ugliness and beauty. "Then out of the night swept a herd of snow-white horses. Magnificently they ran, manes tossing, tails streaming, feet pounding a rhythmic, heart-stirring roll along the ground." She becomes a female Orpheus descending into Hell, though it seems almost certain that the authoress was not aware of this mythic analogy and using it consciously, as would be the case in, say, one of Delany's novels.

Even more certainly she was unaware of the naked sexual construction that can at least hypothetically be put on some of the fantasy incidents in "The Black God's Kiss," first published of the stories, which set the basic pattern. Jirel must kiss a black statue much resembling a lingam. When she returns to the real world and passes on this kiss to the man she loves but thinks she hates, he dies in a fashion suggesting male orgasm—"Great shudders began to go over him... The a last shiver went over him violently, and he flung up his head, the little curling beard *jutting* ceilingward and the muscles of his strong throat corded, and from his lips broke a long, low cry... infinitely alien and infinitely sad." Even pregnancy

seems symbolized: "That which she carried at the core of her being was heavier than anything else in the world, so heavy she could scarcely keep her knees from bending, so heavy her heart *labored* under its weight." [The italics are the reviewers's.]

Most of the novelettes do seem to take place entirely in what can be viewed as Jirel's inner space. This impression is intensified by the strict single viewpoint of the tales and by the many dream-elements—Jirel often almost flies, or else struggles through some equivalent of quicksand.

The prose is excellent, though at times it may seem a bit monotonous to the modern reader, used to rapid changes of viewpoint and a constant flood of shocking and stinging sense impressions, and language with fewer abstract words and universals.

As an example of the great change that has taken place between the Thirties and the Sixties, I would like to mention Joanna Russ's newly finished and as yet unpublished novel *End of Chaos*, which I was privileged to read in manuscript.

In some of her other stories Russ has also created a sword-and-sorcery adventuress, Alyx, but she lives in a subtler and more playful world than the stark one of Joiry's Lady, and has time-traveled to a still more sophisticated one in the novel *Picnic on Paradise*.

End of Chaos, however, is a science-fiction novel which explores more fully than I have ever seen done what telepathy and clairvoyance would actually *feel like* to a person possessing such powers, the full impact of sense impressions transmitted from a distance, the exact way in which the telepath would adjust to them and learn to use them.

Some authors have for good story-

reasons simplified telepathy as much as possible, as Heinlein did in *Time for the Stars*, where it becomes the exact equivalent of a telephone conversation between identical twins.

But Russ chooses to take on the full challenge and the result is a stunning technical achievement. This is no psychedelic novel with a bewildering flood of images linked only by symbolism and the private experiences of the author. There is a science-fiction rationale for all the startling, stinging, and shocking imagery—psionics is linked into space and time instead of being relegated to a hypothetical universe of the eternal. There is also a good, strong human story, well resolved. One looks eagerly forward to seeing this book in print.

—Fritz Leiber

Terry Carr informs me that Joanna Russ' novel will be published in February as an *Ace Special*, under the title *And Chaos Died* (the author's title-change), at 75¢. —TW

NUMBER SIX

Reviewed by Hank Stine

"I will not be folded,
stapled, filed, stamped,
indexed, catalogized,
computerized, or
numbered.

"I am not a number.

"I am a man. A free
man."

But it made no difference, really, who he had been, what he remembered and what he had been made to forget: he was himself, and he knew the interior dimensions of that self. This was sufficient.

The Prisoner

Created, Produced, and Developed by
and starring Patrick McGoochan

It would not have seemed possible even two years ago that one of the signal works of science fiction should be a television series. In fact, on the evidence of the best sf series in the media's history (*Star Trek*), the idea would have been ludicrous. The nature of the media was against it.

Science fiction has, heretofore, always been the work of one, or sometimes two men. Television, on the other hand, is the product of many men, supervised and overseen by still other men; and somewhere along the line anything inventive or original gets nixed. Such material is considered too unsettling for the public; and an unsettled public responds negatively to sponsor's products.

The Madison Avenue concept of the audience is another factor in keeping good sf off the tube. The public is not supposed to be able to identify with non-stereotyped contexts, not supposed to relate to the strange and unfamiliar. Nor are they supposed to enjoy sophisticated, mature programs. Certainly the few excellent series (of any kind), such as *It's a Man's World*, have died in mid-season for lack of viewers.

But these are localized phenomenon, peculiar to the United States. And *The Prisoner* is the work of one man, a Britisher, and is a creation so completely personal as to belong to a new category of art all together.

Recently a group of artists working in various media, have been producing quasi-fictional works in which the major characters are real and only the background created. As in Chester

Anderson's *Butterfly Kid* and Fonda & Hopper's *Easy Rider* the protagonists are the authors themselves, and only the events are imaginary. Their reactions are real, and the reader's awareness of this lends the work a greater dimension and impact than if it were wholly fictional. This allows the artist an opportunity to make a more personal and compelling statement, while preserving the scope and possibilities of fiction.

The Prisoner is such a work.

In America the average television series is an open-ended affair. It opens at random and proceeds in random, abruptly ending when the series is canceled. There is no real beginning or end.

In England this has not always been the case. Often (as with some of the work of Fred Hoyle and the famous Quatermass dramas) a story with structural integrity will be presented in several episodes, be re-run, and then forgotten. It will not be part of some longer series and whatever potency it possesses will not be diluted by the wringing out of every last drop of popularity.

The Prisoner, then, is a television story (as distinguished from a movie story or a book story) complete in seventeen episodes. Each episode, like the sections of a novel, is dramatically complete, advancing a greater whole until the structure is finished and its elements resolved.

Because of this, because it was made in Britain (where shows for sophisticated audiences are encouraged), and because (like Bergman's films) it is the creation of a single man of genius, *The Prisoner* is virtually the only masterpiece to appear on American television and one of the few in the genre of science fiction.

The story is as straight-forward and

relevant as Hesse (to whom its construction seems to owe no little). *Drake*, a secret operative for the British Government (and hero of a previous series starring McGoochan, *Secret Agent/Danger Man*), resigns his post to retire to a small village on the Pembroke Coast of Wales (where the series was actually shot, adding another dimension of reality and unreality to the plot). *Drake* is the repository of valuable and secret information. On the eve of his departure he is gassed in his apartment.

He wakes up in the Village.

The Village is a kind of macabre Disneyish detention camp *a la* Shangri La. On the surface it is a charming Middle European township with a fairytale architecture of ruddy faces and white minarets. Indeed some of the villagers really are the simple, small-townish characters they seem. And some of them are not. The Village is a controlled environment /reality/prison/brain-washing device, designed to contain and/or modify people who (presumably) have vacated positions of governmental responsibility or who have, for one reason or another, proven untrustworthy in such positions. In short, people who know too much.

But which government? The inhabitants are cosmopolitan, coming from all over Europe. The shadowy forces behind the village, represented in temporal authority by *Number Two* (a different actor and character every episode) are virtually omnipotent. They control many men in many places in many lands. *Drake* (assigned the number 6 from the moment of his arrival) can not be sure whether they are his former employers checking up on him, or the other side trying to crack him.

Sometimes they only seem to want to

know the reason he resigned. At other times they appear to want his explanation as the first sign of a surrender that eventually will leave him broken. If it were his own government he might explain, but being uncertain, he will not; and whatever their goals, what they demand is unquestioning acceptance: the one thing he can not give.

For either way, by training and temperament he is not inclined to give away a single fraction of his identity. The prisoner/*Drake*/Number Six is one of those rare men of confident ability and self-reliance (recalling Francisco d'Anconia or *Our Man Flint*). He is a man who knows what and why he is, a supremely secure individual. And in the mutable reality of the Village, where every object can be and is turned against him, his reaction is characteristic:

*The Village, this splendid room,
the mirror in its frame of ormolu,
and even the image in the mirror
were not to be trusted. What, then,
was?*

*His body, the body beneath
these wrinkled evening clothes,
that could be trusted.*

And his mind.

*He could trust (as finally we all
must) himself.*

Over its seventeen episodes, then, *The Prisoner* presents the developments of this premise until the prisoner (Number Six as the Village would have it, though he refuses to be numbered) resolves the situation in the Village and escapes.

As this is happening, his relationship to the Village undergoes a definite evolution. He starts off plotting against his captors and trying to escape. But he is always the loser in these early skirmishes,

always one move behind the more knowledgeable rulers of the Village. But as he loses, he learns, and after a while he is on fairly even terms, fighting more and more often to a stalemate. And finally, through perseverance, he learns enough to turn the system against itself and destroy the Village, liberating himself. (Or does he?)

The show is a Chinese puzzle box of shifting illusion, allusion, and reality. Nothing can be taken for granted about the Village (and is it entirely coincidence that McLuhan talks about a global Village induced by television and that there is a two-way television in every Village dwelling?). Through this surreal landscape (which evokes images of every prison of circumstance and character experienced by man), McGoohan stalks with an enigmatic purposefulness which is as archetypal as it is believable. Here nothing can be trusted but the self, and paranoia is a stable adjustment.

And we are never in doubt that it is McGoohan's Village we are really seeing; not Number Six's, that the world as it is becoming (regimentation, conformity, *et al*) is the real Village, and that this is one man's defiance, statement, attitude toward that world. Certainly *The Prisoner* is a deliberate parable of our times. What man has not, in the face of mechanization, felt his identity threatened and his reality overrun?

When Number Six escapes to the outer world, it is finally seen to be only a larger Village. But, at least, the one of his choosing.

This issue of the individual against his environment, against our present environment, is the teleological and metaphysical concern of modern man. It deals with man's relationship to a time that threatens his very identity, and

through that examines his relationship to himself. These are concerns mastered only by a Dostoevsky (though the ease with which they are mastered is more reminiscent of Victor Hugo), and that they have been mastered for television is stunning.

The Prisoner is thought provoking, exciting, puzzling, disturbing, inventive, and offers through the medium of speculative fiction, a clearer view of the human situation. It is exactly what great science fiction can be, but so seldom is.

The Prisoner

by Thomas Disch

& *Number Two*

by David McDaniel

Ace Books, 60¢

Considering what can be expected of the average novelization (*Star Trek* and *The Man from UNCLE* come most readily to mind), it would have seemed quite unlikely that anything genuine in the way of literature would be expected of a book based on even such an excellent program as *The Prisoner*. It is delightful to find that Thomas Disch's novel is every bit as brilliant and exciting as the original. He writes as if he had directly experienced McGoohan's state of consciousness. His book not only achieves the intensity and clarity of the original, but also is as immense.

Such talent is breathtaking. The character of the prisoner is as real from the inside as McGoohan made it from the exterior; and the level of insight is as valid and compelling as anything in modern occidental literature. It is possible to see exactly how the consciousness of the man of ability functions. This is not the raw posturings of Ayn Rand, but the reality of a rare and

living man.

The story soars from one vividly realized moment to the next, illumining the underpinnings and sinister technology of the Village. Here are the Guardians (those menacing, semi-sentient globe-like shepherds), the master control rooms of reality, the ever-present cameras and spys, the dull, stolid villagers, the phosphorescence of reality.

The events are realer than real, achieving that hallmark of true art.

Once again Drake finds himself in the Village. He is dimly aware of having been someplace similar once before, but much of his recent memory is scrambled, and he is sure of nothing. Who scrambled it and why are as much a mystery as the origins of the Village. The ambiguities of his existence are somehow those of modern man; and they become as relevant.

As he walks through this maze of the real and the unreal, he repeats the evolutions of the television series (which is seen to be seventeen films of his visits to the Village as edited by his captors). He treads the same path to enlightenment, as if trapped in some cosmic mandala. And when he finally learns, as he did before, the answers to his dilemma, it is only to find that his answers give rise to greater questions.

The intricacies of the book defy description. Disch has structured every relevant variation and symbol into his story. To read this work is to experience, for the moment, the consciousness of McGoohan's self-reliant man.

In comparison, David McDaniel's book is a disappointment. It displays an early promise, but betrays it almost at the start and plods onward from there.

His prisoner simply is not McGoohan's. Drake was a raffish, self-possessed loner.

McDaniel's Drake, for all that he is *said* to be such a man, is in essence a regular fellow, the kind of easy-to-identify-with cardboard hero one expects of a television series or a mediocre sf novel. He is little different from Napoleon Solo or any other adventure character.

Where Disch's Village was a fully realized place, populated by believable, intriguing people, the Village in *Number Two* is a shallow set, its inhabitants merely serving to carry out the author's purposes. The Number Six of the original was a taciturn man, speaking only when motivated, and then with a succinct brilliance. McDaniel's protagonist reels of expository material to suit the author's needs.

Having been captured yet again, Number Six sets out to escape. Disch moved from attempt to attempt with an effortless drive, delineating more of the true situation each time. McDaniel spends his time describing what is in essence one escape attempt: a leaden sequence that takes up more than half the book. The plot remains frozen while (in excruciating detail) the prisoner builds the various devices he needs.

Then there is some abortive and muddled action, resolving and illuminating nothing, and Drake's escape is mysteriously foiled. The setting and possibilities are never fully utilized and nothing new emerges. The entire plot might have occupied thirty pages in Disch's work and to better effect.

In actuality McDaniel's book (as they have always been) is a cut above the average novelization. But following, as it does, a work of genius, *Number Two* appears dull and tarnished.

In the evidence of these two novels, it is difficult to decide whether Ace should hedge their bets and stick with these two

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 83)

THE PULSATING PLANET

by JOHN BROOME

There was a concentration of enemy ships on this barren world—and no place to hide them. Yet when Mulloy brought the Space Guard, they had vanished.

A Fantastic Classic

THE dungeons," Colonel Ivy Hopkins said with fastidious savagery, "would be too good for that rascal Mulloy! But I'm damned if he doesn't draw sixteen months on Lune II for this trick! I've never trusted that prankster of a newsman—but this time he's gone too far! You're certain that this asteroid is dead, Daly?"

"Yes, sir," the phlegmatic engineer replied. "We went over every inch of it with young Mulloy, sir—he's outside now under custody. Any metallic mass over a ton on the surface or under it would have shown on the ferrometer. Brulgem's completely empty, sir."

Hopkins nodded. The spare, chevroned figure seemed mentally to rub his palms together.

"Fine," he said. "The charges against Jefferson Mulloy, so-called reporter attached to the Solar Squadron, are the following: Spreading a false

rumor about enemy encampments; drawing my ships a thousand parsecs out of position on a wild-goose chase; and, wasting the Council's fuel and my time! Sixteen months! If he's a model prisoner, he may get out in one year. Bring him in, Daly. I want to put him in irons personally!"

The engineer exited and Hopkins turned to the round port at the back of his office. The flagship, largest of the four war-rockets that comprised the Outer Squadron, rested on Brulgem's sandy soil; and out of his office port, Hopkins could view a desolate expanse, treeless, flat and smooth as a brown marble.

"Hmmp!" the commander snorted. "Enemy camps indeed!"

He had been a blasted fool to take Mulloy's story about an Arcturian base on Brulgem seriously. The Sys-





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tem and Arcturus were nominally at war but no attempt at invasion had taken place for the last seventy-five years. The last one had ended very disastrously, Hopkins knew, for the Arcturians. During the armed peace that ensued the Earth Council had never relaxed vigilance—which accounted for the presence of the Outer Squadron, one of several flotillas that patrolled the System.

HOPKINS disliked the eventless war; but even more he disliked reporters. Newsmen were a breed the braided martinet condemned as a vestigial parasite on the organism of society.

"Swamp bugs," he described them, "buzzing around men who have a job to perform." The flaming red head of Mulloy had irritated him even before he ever spoke to the ebullient reporter. It would, the Commander thought dryly, serve very nicely to decorate the rock-piles of Lune II for a year or so.

He turned as the door opened and Daly reentered, his face flushed.

"Mulloy, sir—" the engineer stammered. "He's gone!"

"Gone!" Hopkins exploded. "Where?"

"I left him in the Press amphibian he uses—with a guard, of course. But he slipped away without being seen and took the guard with him. And Colonel Hopkins—" Daly extended a folded piece of paper hesitantly—"I found this stuck to the lock of our ship by a wad of chicle, sir."

Hopkins took the slip in arctic silence.

"Dear Bluenose," he read, "*Sorry I couldn't accompany you back to Earth. A pressing engagement. I'm sure you understand. My regards to Mrs. Hopkins and all the little Hopkinse. Yours*

till death—preferably yours. J. T. Mulloy. P.S. *There is an Arcturian base here, and I'm going to find it!*"

"Incorrigible!" Hopkins breathed. "I'll have him flayed by rockets, par-boiled and skinned alive!"

"Shall I order pursuit, sir?"

"No!" Hopkins gulped down his rage. "I've got a better notion. There's no food or shelter on this asteroid. We'll let him cool his heels here for a day or more. When he tries to get off we'll intercept him. Jefferson Mulloy will come back to Earth, Daly, with an escort that *won't* be a guard of honor!"

THE light steel cruiser skimmed blithely along the monotonous sandy surface of Brulgem. Inside the tiny amphibian, a large red-headed young man held the wheel with one hand, while with the other he kept a pocket derringer dug into the ribs of his companion—a small terrier of a man, half-bald, miserable and dressed in Patrol blue.

"Ike," Jeff Mulloy was saying, "I want to be friends. I've got a lot of friends, despite what Ivy Hopkins may say. Old Bluenose doesn't like me because it's my business to point out any official stupidities I see. And I see plenty."

"Listen," groaned Corporal Henrik "Ike" Ikkerson, "you got to take me back, Mulloy. Why, the Old Man may have me court-martialed! I'll be shot for desertion!"

"Nonsense, you're not deserting, Ike. I'm kidnaping you. Besides, it's too late. Look."

The terrain under the cruiser trembled as a great shark-like body shot upward from Brulgem. The grey shape was followed by three more, hurtling zenithward and disappearing into the blackness above the planetoid.

"The squadron!" the little man in Patrol serge moaned. "They're leaving me behind. Now I'm in for it!"

Mulloy pocketed the gun and leaned back.

"Listen, Ike," he said earnestly. "You and I have known each other for a long time, haven't we? Am I the kind of guy to peddle pipe-dreams? I tell you there's an Arcturian base somewhere on this big chunk of silicate. I saw it a week ago when I landed for minor repairs. It wasn't two hundred yards from me. But it was night and I got away without being seen. Now, Scotch has worked wonders with me—but it's never yet materialized an entire enemy camp—batteries, destroyers and all!"

"You mean that yarn you spilled to the Commander was a true one?" Ikkerson blinked incredulously.

"Either that," the redhead said solemnly, "or the solid Mulloy strain has finally cracked."

"But Sergeant Daly couldn't find any base," Ikkerson protested. "Where is it?"

"That," Jefferson Thomas Mulloy replied with unaccustomed seriousness, "is exactly what I'm going to find out before I leave Brulgem. Are you with me, Ike?"

"Yep!" the little corporal returned with a grin. "Blast it, I am! I believe you, Jeff—and besides I always had a yen to go AWOL. Let's go!"

THE two settled back in the cruiser and skimmed along on the spiral course Mulloy had charted to cover Brulgem. But after an hour, the newsman frowned troubledly. It wasn't that he couldn't locate the base—that might take time. But he couldn't even discern an area remotely resembling the one in which the Arcturian camp had lain! Where before there had

been dark mountain ridges and shadowed valleys, there was now nothing but a flat expanse of sand—dry rubbery silicate that stretched around Brulgem like a tightly-drawn carpet. He was beginning to think that the encampment was a figment of his brain—when Ikkerson suddenly sat upright.

"What's that?" the corporal was squinting through the forward windport. Mulloy followed his gaze and saw a box-like structure upraised on the sand dead ahead. Its surface gleamed like a transparent mineral. It was roughly twenty feet square.

"I don't know what it is," the redhead muttered halting the amphibian, "but I'll bet two pistons out of my crankcase it wasn't here earlier today! Come on, we're going to investigate."

The two donned their shoulder-fitting bulgers* and emerged onto the spongy brownish ground a few yards from the glass square. Mulloy saw as they advanced that the strange structure was occupied.

Sight of its occupant brought both Earthmen to a halt. The creature was hardly four feet high, a dwarfed misshapen figure with a great unwieldy head, dressed in an outlandish purple uniform covered with braid. He was sighting through an instrument on a tripod that looked like a giant sextant; and as he gazed, the dwarf exuded a kind of hateful, venomous evil that sent

* A bulger is a rubberoid space helmet, which is provided with an oxygen tank that inflates it and provides the occupant with breathing facilities while on a planet that has no atmosphere, or while in empty space between planets. It gets its name from two sources: from the ludicrous way in which it bulges when the oxygen is turned on, and from the name of its inventor, Arnold Bulger, who devised the first rubberoid space suit and proved its practicability, and its superiority over metal suits, by leaping into space from a liner's port, and the means of a portable radio, contacted another ship two Earth days later, just as his oxygen was running out, none the worse for wear.—Ed.

a shiver even through the big frame of the redheaded newsman.

"Cute little gent, eh?" Ike shuddered at his side.

The dwarf seemed impervious to their presence, not even turning when Mulloy rapped his fist on the glass to attract his attention. Nor did the shouts that followed attract the figure's attention. He was either deaf or they couldn't make contact through the surface of the glass-like mineral. Mulloy circled the structure without discovering a means of entrance.

"Come on, Ike," he frowned, "use your pistol-butt on this wall. I want to talk to the general."

There was something about the dwarf aside from his gargoyle-like appearance that puzzled Mulloy. He was no arcturian—having neither the Viking build, white hair nor featureless face of Earth's traditional enemies. What was he? Mulloy watched uncertainly as Ikkerson raised his heavy regulation gun for a second blow—and then it happened.

Jeff Mulloy felt himself falling—falling rapidly and helplessly downward. For a few seconds all went black and misty before his eyes. The abyss into which he was descending seemed bottomless, without end. Then, with a cushioned feathery shock he struck solid ground.

WHEN Jeff Mulloy picked himself dazedly to his feet, several things clamored for his benumbed attention. First, Ikkerson, the cruiser, the dwarf in the glass house—all were gone. He was on uneven ground in the midst of a shadowy hill-rimmed valley that seemed oddly familiar—though strikingly different from the smooth terrain of a moment ago. And, second, there were scuffling sounds and cries of struggle near him. He wheeled about—in

time to catch in his arms a trembling feminine form. On his chest a black tousled head panted with fright.

"Well," Mulloy muttered in astonishment as he tried gently to disengage the girl's arms in order to get a look at her. "I didn't know I was expected!"

It was with some difficulty that he finally unclasped the girl's arms and stepped back. But the difficulty didn't come because the girl resisted. Mulloy experienced the peculiar sensation that there was an actual physical attraction, some magnetism of flesh, pulling them together so that his hands clung to her shoulders. It was with some effort that he kept his distance.

The girl recovered herself quickly after glancing about. She looked up at Mulloy with an expression of surprise that gave way oddly to anxiety and then to a downright coldness.

"Tha-ank you," she said. The words were strange and formal as if book-learned and never previously used.

"For what?" Mulloy smiled. "Thank you!"

The girl blushed haughtily and stepped further back. Mulloy felt the queer magnetism between them slacken.

"You sa-aved my li-life." The girl gestured off to her right and for the first time Mulloy saw that several figures, vague in the shadows of the valley, were scampering away in the distance. "Your sud-den appearance," the girl spoke more quickly, "frightened Vagar and his cowards away." A flash of bitter contempt made her soft voice quiver. Jeff Mulloy blinked uncertainly.

"Then I'm glad I happened along," he smiled. "Though I must admit it was an accident."

The girl did not answer his smile; her vermilion blue eyes were measuring him almost suspiciously.

"Listen," Mulloy protested, "I may be a stranger, but I'm a friend. Earth, you know—like you. You are Earth, aren't you?"

The girl said nothing. Mulloy saw an odd mixture of emotions flit over her face, hostility softened by a kind of feminine weakness and pity. At last she gestured for him to follow her and started off in the direction opposite to that her attackers had taken. Was she guiding him to safety? To her people, perhaps? With a puzzled shrug, the newsman strode after her.

HE noticed now that she wore no bulger, and cautiously tried removing his own headpiece. Sure enough, there was air! A thin but adequate mixture. This was getting more and more confusing. Was he still on Brulgem? He could be nowhere else, despite the startling transformation. For the moment, the redhead stopped trying to analyze the metamorphosis that had occurred and concentrated on the girl, as they walked upward from the valley.

She was, Earth or not, a beauty by most System standards; her oval face and flawless ivory complexion provided a perfect setting for the deep blue eyes that lay under long lashes. One thing was certain, Mulloy thought as he watched her out of a corner of his eye: she was no Arcturian. Once or twice he had seen press shots of the lumbering, yellow-haired oxen who were the fraus of that distant race. They compared to this girl as a plow horse to a racing filly.

"Here," the girl said suddenly, and led him through a narrow, half-hidden ravine in the hill. They emerged on a rocky ledge that overlooked another valley. But in the center of the curving natural cupola below them, the newsman descried a cluster of dwellings, flat and square, surrounded by a huge

wall; and further off under the lee of the opposite hill lay *the ominous muzzles of great land batteries and the sleek, grey shapes of space-destroyers!*

Jeff Mulloy barely repressed a cry of amazement. This was it! This was the encampment he had stumbled on when he landed for repairs! Every detail was as he remembered it: the great stone barracks near the guns, the slate-colored adobe houses surrounding the camp square; and the huge figures of the Arcturians walking to and fro, carrying building materials and instruments of steel!

"Wait," his sudden command halted the girl. "We'll say goodbye here if you're going into that camp."

The girl turned, her small brow creased impatiently.

"Come," she said. "My father will not let the White-hairs harm you. You have saved my life."

Mulloy grimaced. Somehow he trusted this girl's straightforward gaze; but her judgment was another matter. He would be an idiot to walk into an open trap, yet death was inevitable if he remained out in this bleak stony wilderness without food or water. He would have to trust the girl for the present at least.

UPBRAIDING himself for a fool, the redhead followed the lithe, tunic-clad form that was picking its way daintily but surely down the steep slope. They approached a heavy, grilled barrier that divided the massive wall and was flanked by two huge, stone guard-houses on either side. Mulloy stuck his hand into his pocket and fingered his tiny derringer without drawing much comfort from it.

Suddenly the door of one of the guard-houses opened and a towering figure bounded forth, a uniformed figure with white locks and a huge face

that was a blank wall of flesh. An Arcturian warrior! But before Mulloy could even extract his puny weapon, the girl at his side uttered a sharp command in a strange tongue. The giant stopped abruptly and the girl addressed a few more words to it. It rumbled something like "Eelen" or "Elin" and disappeared back into the stone turret.

"Thanks," Jeff Mulloy muttered wiping his brow. "Now we're even, Elin. Is that your name?"

"Yes," the girl said. "I am Elin."

"And I," the redhead grinned, "am Mulloy. The pleasure's mine."

The girl did not rise to his flippancy note.

"Come," she said anxiously. "Stay close beside me and walk fast when we are inside."

The odd magnetism made it easy for them to stay close, Mulloy found as they passed through the gate; her shoulder sort of clung to the middle of his forearm as they walked. Now that they were in the camp, Mulloy saw that he was an object of great attention. The big Arcturians halted their activity as he passed and gaped as if they had never seen a man of Earth before. Which, Mulloy reflected, was very possibly true considering the last encounter.

He recognized the System's traditional enemies from private viewings he had seen of old newsreels.

The Arcturians were big as ever, averaging about nine feet high. Their pallid, pigmentless faces were without features except for two small openings in the center which served not only as eyes, but as ears and a voice aperture as well.

It was foolhardy to underrate the lumbering giants, however, as earlier System commanders had discovered to their misfortune. The Arties were inhumanly clever with tools and had a

cunning in warfare that was all their own. Their fingers were a clue—ten to each hand, and all without joints, merely supple cartilage, strong and pliable as copper wire. With them, the White-hairs could splice a manifold switchboard in ten minutes or demolish a steel building in less.

THE girl walked more quickly as she approached a large adobe dwelling that fronted on the foliage- and shrub-covered square in the midst of the camp. Mulloy glancing back saw that a crowd of the Arties were following them now, muttering low suspicious sounds in their squeaky, high-pitched voices. Obviously, only the presence of the girl restrained them. The newsman glanced back at Elin. Who was this girl? And how did she come to be in an Arcturian camp?

He had no time to ask questions, however, as Elin guided him quickly into the large building and shut the door behind him. Outside, Mulloy heard the ominous sounds of the increasing crowd rumble louder.

"Wait," Elin said. "I will inform my father. Do not fear. He will not let the White-hairs harm you."

Mulloy sank uneasily into one of the metal chairs in the anteroom. So Elin's father was a big shot here! It was a comforting thought. Jeff Mulloy had found that in tight spots an influential friend was more useful than Aladdin's lamp. In a moment, the girl returned.

"My father," she said, "greets you and asks you to accompany this guard." She indicated the Arcturian who had reappeared with her. "He says that it will be best for him to take you into protective custody for awhile. And he intends to speak to you soon. Please do as he says!"

Mulloy frowned and nodded.

Protective custody; the phrase had a

dark brown unpleasant taste. The redhead was led down a narrow flight of spiral stone steps that opened from the anteroom, and ushered into a great bare room somewhere in the underground caverns beneath the adobe house. Hearing the lock click behind him as the door closed did not make Mulloy feel any better. He was a prisoner. He had been a fool to trust the girl, the redhead told himself. It would have been better to take his chances out in the wilderness.

"Hya!" a familiar voice came from one corner and a small figure advanced holding one hand to his head. In the drab rays that seeped in from a single tiny window high in one wall, Mulloy recognized Corporal Ikkerson.

"Ike! Well, I'll be—! I thought I left you behind—or above!"

As the little corporal came close, the newsman saw he was nursing a lump on his head the size of a tank bearing and almost as black.

"Nope," Ikkerson grinned wanly. "Right after you disappeared, I took the dive too. I guess we both sort of vanished, eh?"

"Yeh! But up to now I wasn't sure whether it was all a hashdream or not! Now I know this camp is real, and Elin, too."

"Elin?"

Mulloy quickly detailed his encounter with the girl and her escape from someone named Vagar. Ikkerson started at the last name, and took a folded piece of parchment from his breast pocket.

"Take a look at this," he said. "I found it on the floor near the door when I came to."

THE writing on the paper was printed in stilted, formal fashion: DO NOT DESPAIR. BE PATIENT AND ABOVE ALL GIVE NO IN-

FORMATION TO KHALEMAN. WE SHALL ENDEAVOR TO EXPLAIN LATER WHEN YOUR RESCUE CAN BE EFFECTED. UNTIL THEN REMEMBER, DO NOT TRUST KHALEMAN. And it was signed, VAGAR.

"Vagar!" Mulloy's rust eyebrows arched. "Well, that makes everything on this screwy world as clear as grease-goo, doesn't it! Who is this Vagar and why in the seven galactic universes should he warn us against a chap named Khaleman?"

Ikkerson took out a battered pipe and pulled on it thoughtfully.

"I think I have a few clues," he said. "The Arties who picked me up after I grounded near the camp jabbered a lot while they brought me in. I was too dazed to try to run for it at first, and when I did I got this." He fingered the discolored onion protruding from his skull. "But before that some of the things they said came through. Arcturian was basic training in the Squadron, you know, and it's pretty simple when you get the hang of it.

"What I got was this: This Brulgem we're on is a rogue, you know, coming into the System and then leaving it for parts unknown. Well, the Arcturian base here is big enough to make this asteroid a travelling arsenal! They expect to use it as a springboard to seize key System bases when they get close enough."

"I figured as much," Mulloy nodded. "But it sounds like suicide on a large scale. How in hell do they expect to get through our outer defenses without being spotted. And who's their leader? Is it Khaleman?"

"I don't know who the leader is," Ikkerson shook his head worriedly. "But about being spotted—when Colonel Hopkins was here, the Squadron saw nothing. You and I drove around for

hours and we didn't see a thing until we fell, or whatever it was that happened to us. There's a lot on Brulgem we don't understand yet, Jeff."

"Yeh," the redhead agreed, throwing himself on the single cot that graced the bare cell and lighting a cigarette from a crumpled pack, "a lot, Ike, not excluding a pair of blue eyes that do strange things when you look at them." He paused and added more seriously. "However I've got a feeling, a hunch that we're gonna learn more soon when we hear from this bird, Khaleman!"

THE redheaded newshawk's premonition was borne out even sooner than he expected but in a slightly different fashion. The figure that bent over him, shaking him awake on the cot a few hours later, was no man's, but Elin's! Mulloy sat up with a start. Ike was snoring peacefully on the floor a few yards away.

"Shhh," the girl whispered anxiously. "Please make no noise and listen to me. I have come to you because I feel I can trust you—and there is no one else I can trust!"

"Go on," Mulloy said in a low voice.

"Khaleman—my father has set a trap for Vagar. Vagar is an outlaw here. When his uprising begins, father has arranged that Vagar and all his followers will be shot down like dogs! It will be frightful! You must help me stop it."

"If? What can I do?"

"I can help you out of here. You must find Vagar in the hills and warn him."

Mulloy stood up and stared at the girl in wonderment.

"Wait a minute. I thought you hated this Vagar. Wasn't he the one that tried to kill you or kidnap you?"

"Yes," the girl said. "But, please, do not ask me to explain now." There

was a look in her wide blue gaze that only one emotion can place there. Mulloy felt a strange twinge run through him.

"Oh!" the redhead grunted. "I see, Ambivalence. Hate and love coexistent. And I'm to play Cupid?"

"Please don't misunderstand," the girl pleaded.

"I don't."

"Then, will you do—?"

Elin stopped. A perceptible shiver ran the length of her shapely form and her eyes darted in apprehension to the door which was opening. Mulloy followed her eyes—

A misshapen glaring figure stood in the doorway surrounded by Arcturian guards. An ugly macrocephalic brow overhung two black coruscating eyes; and the twisted, malformed shape was adorned by a cream colored uniform. But despite the changed attire, the newshawk had no difficulty in recognizing the "little general" of the glass house! "Khaleman!" the redhead whispered to himself. "Sure as I'm two feet high!"

The dwarf stood there swaying slightly because of his unbalanced body, huge on top and tapering to the slender feet. His steady unblinking stare was baleful, unnerving. Elin seemed to shrink under the piercing gaze.

"Father," she began brokenly. "I—"

The dwarf cut her short with a harsh imperative command and Elin went, head bowed, from the cell. Thereupon, the macrocephalic issued several other guttural orders to his subordinates and, drawing a floor-length black cape around his huge shoulders, disappeared abruptly after the girl. Two of the Arcturians came forward and gripped Mulloy by the arms, almost carrying the big newsman toward the door.

"See you later, Ike," the redhead

tossed back over his shoulder, "I hope."

JEFF MULLOY, thrust without ceremony into a stately, lavishly furnished room several levels above his cell, looked about him curiously. The rich, thick wall tapestries; the intricately-worked Venusian carpet underfoot; the metallic Virga-wood desk with its delicate intaglios behind which Khaleman sat—all bespoke a rich, almost decadent culture; certainly not the mechanical culture of Arcturus. It was more like the room of an intellectual Earthman. Mulloy glanced at the dwarf behind the impressive desk with unslackened interest. Where had he seen this man before?

At a sign from Khaleman, the huge White-hairs released their grip on him and stepped to the rear. Mulloy approached the desk and stared down into the black, intense gaze of the dwarf.

"You will excuse my daughter," Khaleman began suavely, almost casually. "Elin has become distraught during our—ah—our journey and sometimes her words reflect only her rather overactive imagination."

Mulloy watched the gaudily-dressed dwarf in silence as Khaleman emphasized his words with small flourishes of his tiny, well-kept hands. Was this an overture of friendship? The dwarf's initial cordiality almost took the redhead off his guard.

"I will be frank with you, Mis-ter Mulloy," Khaleman continued unctuously. "The penalty for spying on Brulgem is consignment to the Crystal Cube. However, in consideration of the part you played in saving my daughter's life from the renegade Vagar—I will commute your sentence."

"In return for what?" Mulloy asked bluntly.

The dwarf's lips curved into a knowing smile as he regarded the redhead.

"I believe you can be of assistance to me, Mr. Mulloy. I will explain briefly. There is a section of this camp which has foolish notions of invading your System. I have not been able to dissuade them. But by a detailed account of the strength of Earth bases, which you can supply, I will be able to convince Vagar and his followers of the futility of the contemplated invasion. Will you cooperate?"

Mulloy laughed shortly.

"You're knocking on the wrong door, Khaleman," he said. "I don't know System bases—but even if I did I don't think I'd let you have them."

"Please," the dwarf was not taken aback by the blunt words, "let us understand each other. Besides being of service to your people and mine, you will—er—avoid the Crystal Cube by cooperating. Is that clear?"

THE two stared into each other's eyes but Mulloy remained silent. At the back of the redhead's mind, the problem of where he had seen Khaleman before had been working. Now it suddenly came to him, and he snapped his fingers with a wry grin.

"Got it!" Mulloy ejaculated. "Khaleman, eh? Weren't you once called Kha LeMin—a French-Russian who tried to overthrow the Council awhile back and substitute a puppet dictator of his own!"

The dwarf's huge face did not change expression in the slightest but Mulloy detected a faint narrowing of the luminous black orbs, as if their owner were afraid they might give away his secret.

"You are mistaken," Khaleman said in a quiet voice. "I am not of Earth, Mr. Mulloy."

"No?" The redhead bent forward over the desk. "Listen, Khaleman, I'm a newspaperman. It's my business to remember things like this. You were

last seen in the System exactly twenty-two years ago. There was a report of your death, but it remained unconfirmed. You became known because of your activities as The Man Who Hated Earth. The Patrol would like to know that you went to Arcturus!"

The dwarf sat motionless for an instant but by perceptible degrees his pallid complexion turned a livid green. The mask was off!

"They will know," the croaked voice was almost unrecognizable. "All Earth will know—when it is too late! But as for you, Mis-ter Mulloy—" Khaleman was on his feet swaying almost drunkenly—"as for you, it is my belief that already you know far too much!"

"Mebbe," Mulloy glanced behind him quickly. "But the Arcturians might be interested also!" He wheeled and faced the two White-hairs at the back of the room. "Listen, you two! Tell your people that this man is only using your race as pawns to carry out a private vengeance on the System. Do you hear?"

The Arties remained stolid and impassive as wood posts.

"Fool!" Khaleman grated with withering contempt. "Do you think they'd believe you—even if they understood your language? Besides, what you said is a lie! I have completely identified myself with Arcturian culture. It is superior in every way to the stupid democracy of the System and it will in time rule this Galaxy!"

Mulloy listened grimly.

"Then your talk about Vagar was just a ruse, as I suspected! You, Kha LeMin the Earth-hater, are the one who is leading the Arcturians into this venture. And Vagar must be one of those who oppose your plans—which is why he's an outlaw. Well, that makes sense at last!"

"Yes," the dwarf said softly with a

fanged unmirthful grin. "Doesn't it, Mr. Mulloy. But now that you know the truth, what do you propose to do? That is—in the short time during which the Crystal Cube is made ready for your—ah—occupancy?"

MULLOY said nothing and faced the leering dwarf impassively. Out of the corner of his eye, the redhead was watching the Arties at the rear and calculating his chances. They were minute, but if he could get his derringer into Khaleman's back—his muscles flexed unnoticeably for a spring but at that moment the dwarf ripped out a series of guttural commands and the newshawk found himself covered by the blunt weapons of the White-hairs. He recognized the guns from squadron manuals; they threw a nasty chemical that killed instantly—blood-congealers, they were called. It was useless to try anything now.

"Good-by, my young friend," Khaleman said mockingly. "You will not see me again—though I will have the pleasure of watching you once more!"

The meaning of the dwarf's last crack was not clear to Mulloy till later. He was dragged downstairs again toward his cell. Whatever the Crystal Cube was, Khaleman hadn't made it sound pleasant! Before he entered it—if it came to that—the redhead decided grimly that he would take care of just as many Arties as he could. The less the better when Hopkins or another Patrol leader finally came to grips with Khaleman's battalions.

Picking himself up from the stone flagging of his cell where the guards threw him, Jeff Mulloy hardly noticed the figure before him until the Arcturian was directly in front of him.

"Hel-lo," the White-hair said slowly. Mulloy looked up to an unkempt figure whose uniform had been sadly bedrag-

gled and torn. But the thing that startled the redhead were the eyes, small but well-defined, in the massive featureless face of his visitor. Also, there was something about this Arcturian, a certain air about his manner and bearing that made Mulloy grin wryly and stick out his hand.

"Hello, Vagar," he said. "So they got you, too!"

The other gripped the Earthman's hand in a manner that made Mulloy feel his paw was caught in a cement-mixer.

"No, my friend," Vagar said. "Not yet." His voice was deep, more manly than the usual shrill Arcturian intonation. Altogether, the strange White-hair presented the picture of a perfect fighting man able to use either wits or muscles when the occasion demanded. Mulloy could not help feeling a slight pang of envy as he regarded Elin's choice. The girl had good taste anyway!

"But listen," the redhead remembered suddenly. "Elin told me to warn you about Khaleman's trap."

"I know," Vagar nodded. "But that is no longer necessary. I have seen Elin, herself. There are more of our movement here in the camp than even Khaleman suspects! But I must be quick. The time is almost ripe for our uprising. Before it, you will be delivered from this cell."

"And Ike—my friend?" For the first time, Mulloy realized that the little man in Patrol blue was missing from the room. A cloud passed over Vagar's impassive countenance.

"I am sorry," the Arcturian said. "Your friend has already been taken to the Crystal Cube. It was unavoidable. Rest assured that if anything could have prevented it, we would have tried."

BUT, man!" Mulloy cried. "I can't let Ike die! There must be some-

thing—some way to stop Khaleman!"

"Please," Vagar laid a heavy, consoling hand on the Earthman's shoulder. "I tell you it is too late to help your poor friend. You must think of yourself now, and of our movement. We want peace—an end to this senseless war between our races. True Arcturians have for long secretly desired to end hostilities. Only Khaleman's scheme prevented an armistice!"

"Just what is this scheme?"

"I don't know," Vagar shook his great head. "But in some way it is connected with the mystery of this planet to which Khaleman alone holds the key. Brulgem is no ordinary world. You have no doubt noticed the peculiar magnetism between living bodies. Yet the attraction is not always present. Regularly, at the end of a period equal to one of your moon's, there is a strange cataclysm that passes instantly, hardly noticed over this planet. It is a sort of vibration that I can hardly describe."

"Go on," Mulloy said. The redhead's brow was furrowed in troubled concentration.

"Now the magnetism is at work," Vagar said, "but with the next vibration of the terrain it will be gone. The air we breathe will be gone, too; and all of us will don our space-helmets for another moon. Aside from these, everything will appear exactly the same as before."

"You know," Mulloy asked, "that this camp is invisible and intangible to outsiders?"

"Yes. That is the principle reason why the Elders of Arcturus sanctioned this invasion. Khaleman promised them that this expeditionary force would not be discovered until too late; but he gave no hint as to how it would be done."

"The invisibility does not come from a difference in dimension," Mulloy

frowned. "A System Squadron I brought to Brulgem covered the terrain with an interferoscope. As a matter of fact, it's not constant! When I first happened to land here, I saw this base. Yet a week later, when I came back, it was gone!"

Vagar listened without comment.

"I cannot fathom the mystery of Brulgem," he said at last. "Perhaps you will succeed, Mulloy. But time is growing perilously short. It is scarcely more than a matter of *kivis*—hours before Brulgem will be well inside the System. Once the first Earth bases are captured by surprise attack, it is arranged that the major Arcturian force will arrive quickly. Only a miracle can avert a bloody renewal of this senseless war—"

There was a slight sound that came from behind the closed door of the cell. Vagar listened intently as if it were a signal.

"I have remained here too long already," he said. "I must go. But before nightfall—if I am still alive—you will be freed. And together we will make a final attempt to stop Khaleman."

The two shook hands in a silence that cemented the rapid but firm friendship that had sprung between them; and Vagar slipped quietly out of the cell. Alone, Jeff Mulloy strode to and fro, his eyes fixed on the stone flagging underfoot sightlessly, his brain working furiously.

OF all the strange aspects of Brulgem, the periodic vibration that Vagar had spoken of struck the newshawk most forcibly. Mulloy felt that here, in this periodicity, lay Khaleman's secret. It was regular according to the Arcturian. Therefore it was logical to assume that it was due to natural causes and outside the dwarf's control. But

Khaleman was the only one who knew it intimately enough to guide his actions accordingly!

The redheaded newshawk felt like a man before a disarrayed cardboard puzzle. All the pieces lay before him, yet he could not arrange them to make sense. The feeling of futile helplessness enraged him but did not bring the mystery any closer to solution. Further, the enforced confinement was telling on his nerves. He calmed himself with an effort.

By upturning his metal cot, Mulloy found that he could just reach the small square hole in the cell wall and peer into it. The aperture was the outlet of a horizontal ventilator and he discovered that he could see a section of the camp.

The queer, starless night of Brulgem shed a pale radiance on slow-moving Arties carting supplies out of the barracks into the destroyers. The ships were lit up; yellow light from their square ports falling in shafts to the shadowy ground below.

Zero hour was approaching! Well, Mulloy reflected with grim irony, he wouldn't be cooped up here much longer! It would be either Vagar or the Crystal Cube. One way or the other he'd be out damned soon!

IT was not Vagar who came.

Jeff Mulloy's jaw settled hard as he watched the picked corps of uniformed Arties troop into his cell. Khaleman's minions surrounded the redhead, two before and two in back, execution style, and marched him up into the street level. With red-rimmed, sleepless eyes, Mulloy took in the misty, milkish dawn that had come to Brulgem. Vagar had not come—which meant the worst. Only death would have stopped the deep-voiced Artie from keeping his word.

The squad marched him toward the

foliage-rimmed public square in the center of the camp. Once inside, Mulloy saw that the entire population of Brulgem, soldiers as well as civilians and women, were assembled in the square on hastily-constructed tiers of benches. So his death was going to be a sort of a big-top show, Mulloy thought with wry contempt. Well, the big flat-faced apes would be disappointed if they expected to see him dance to Khaleman's tune and beg for mercy!

The squad led him without halting toward the middle of the square and Mulloy's gaze narrowed puzzledly as he saw the structure that lay there. It was about twenty feet high and roughly a square. He couldn't be sure about the shape because the strange erection was completely covered by a muffling shroudlike cloth. It looked like a gigantic bird-cage with the hood thrown over it. Above it was a pulley attached to the hood, apparently designed to pull it off at the proper time.

Mulloy had no time to examine the Crystal Cube further. Before he could move, three pairs of ham-like Arcturian hands pinned his arms helplessly to his sides; while the fourth guard found an opening in the hood and pulled it aside a trifle, revealing a narrow, dark aperture. Without further ceremony, the newshawk was thrust into the opening—just as out of a corner of his eye he saw the hood going up. The aperture closed behind him.

He stood motionless in semi-darkness that gave way at once to drab grey light as the hood outside came off. He stood with his back to the closed aperture; sunlight seeped in through walls of creamy opacity around him, and even before he knew what danger lurked in the Cube, Mulloy realized what mockery had lain behind Khaleman's last words to him. The walls

must admit one way vision—so that the dwarf could see in while he could not look out!

His muscles tightened involuntarily as his body automatically girded itself for what might befall. Then, with a start of astonishment, he saw across the metallic floor of the cube—a crumpled, familiar form: Ikkerson!

"Ike!" In three great strides, Mulloy was at the other side of the strange cage. But even as he bent over the fallen shape, Ikkerson's voice came to him, weakly, as the man in Patrol blue lifted his head a trifle:

"Watch out, Jeff! *Behind you!*"

MULLOY whirled as a long fantastic shadow fell athwart him and Ikkerson. The sight that met his eyes as he turned seemed to turn the blood in the newshawk's veins into brittle ice. A great spiral shape reared upward from the floor and swayed over his head. The thing had no features; its silver grey mottled body, spiralled like a corkscrew, was thick as a man's waist. It exuded a noisome foul vapor from two holes at the front of its knobbed, shapeless head.

Even as Mulloy, hardly aware of what he was doing, dodged the creature's first awkward lunge, it came to the newshawk that the light streaming in through the translucent walls of the cube irritated the thing, just as the hood lulled—which accounted for the fact that Ikkerson was still alive.

By exercising all his agility, the newshawk avoided the next vicious attacks of the reptilian monster. His side-stepping seemed to infuriate the creature which rose again and again snake-like on its hind quarters and lunged its ponderous frame at the human. Two short fang-like protuberances in the thing's head particularly caught the Earthman's attention; and

he knew instinctively as he dodged that the touch of the fangs meant horrible death.

It was clear to Mulloy that he could not keep up this onesided game much longer; one unlucky misstep and his number was posted. Besides, he was beginning to breathe heavily already while the spiral monster was coming at him faster than ever. In desperation, the newshawk yanked out his only weapon, a puny pen knife with a two-inch blade. The Arties hadn't even bothered to take it from him.

Mulloy, bobbing and weaving at the last instant each time to conserve every bit of energy, attempted to bring his pitiful little weapon into play against his gigantic adversary. But the knife barely penetrated the creature's shell-like hide and drew no blood. Mulloy saw with added horror the few drops of fuming white liquid that oozed from the tiny hole he had made.

His strength was waning, the Earthman felt with despair. He could no longer summon up the energy to leap aside; and with the thing's last lunge, Mulloy felt a hot wet fang touch his temple and almost but not quite penetrate the skin. He could go one or two more at the most! With set jaw, Jeff Mulloy prepared to meet his end.

"I hope they enjoyed the show—the bloodthirsty apes!" the redhead thought with a flash of bitter irony.

THEN as he moved slowly, barely escaping the fierce lunge that almost pinned him against one wall, Mulloy saw something queer on the creature's silvery frame. A small dark blotch had appeared around the hole he had made in the hide—a blue patch that seemed to be widening, staining the viscous, milky whiteness inside a mottled color.

Puzzled, the newshawk glanced

quickly at the knife he was holding. Sure enough! The redhead's pounding heart beat even faster. He had stabbed the thing with the wrong end of the pen-knife—with the end which held a refillable pen.

A sudden desperate thought—a last, frantic hope came to the Earthman and simultaneously he acted, moving under the swaying, lunging thing, under its huge silvery midsection, and delivering with the last bit of strength left in him a powerful upward thrust with the reversed knife.

As he felt the hardened point drive into the pulpy mass under the hide, Mulloy ejected the entire contents of the tiny tube in the pen. Then he ducked and threw himself the length of the Cube.

The creature remained in the middle of the floor swaying as if stunned. Its reared head went from side to side, slowly at first and then faster. Looking below the head, Mulloy saw the aniline dye at work, spreading an inky blackness all through the semi-transparent insides of the reptile. The thing's pulpy viscera seemed to suck up the ink like a sponge.

In a few seconds as the newshawk watched half afraid to hope, the creature's silvery color turned a dull, fetid black. It began to thresh about the room in a terrible fury; but its movements were aimless, frantic and accompanied by great convulsive spasms. A shudder ran through Mulloy as he watched the awful death throes of the corkscrew reptile. In thirty seconds the monster lay an inert mass in the center of the Cube.

"Are you all right, Ike?" Mulloy turned anxiously to the little corporal who had just raised himself to his elbows. Ikkerson nodded, shaking his head dizzily.

"I guess so. The thing hit me and

threw me to the floor; that's the last thing I remember until you came in, Jeff. I don't think the fangs touched me." Ike shuddered.

"No. They must have pulled the hood down too soon."

"What will they do with us now?"

Mulloy frowned grimly.

"I don't know," he began, when suddenly the aperture to the Cube opened and Khaleman's guards entered, pulling the Earthmen to their feet. The red-head threw off the aiding hands angrily and got up unassisted. The armed minions marched the two humans out of the Cube of death and into the open.

JEFF MULLOY took deep, grateful draughts of the fresh air as they emerged. It was good to be alive—even if it were only a short time longer. To his right, at one side of the square, a commotion of some sort seemed to be in progress. A group of Arties seemed to be arguing with someone there; their tentacle-like hands were gesticulating in the air. But the newshawk could not make out the cause of the little rumpus.

Something else caught his eye. The squad guarding the two Earthmen had halted, rather uncertainly, not far from the Cube; and glancing back Mulloy's gaze swept the structure which had not been hooded.

"Look!" he gripped the little corporal's arm suddenly. "The Cube! Do you recognize it, Ike?"

Ikkerson turned and a frown passed over his face.

"Well, I'll be—" the corporal ejaculated in a low tone. "It's the glass house in which we first saw Khaleman, Jeff!"

"Yes!" the newshawk said slowly as a look of incredulous wonder passed over his face. "And I think I've got it, Ike!"

"Got—what?"

"The Mystery of Brulgem!" Mulloy said in a low, animated tone. Khaleman's secret! It's crazy but it's the only thing that makes sense!"

The guard suddenly moved them on a ways, then halted again. The commotion at the side of the square was still going on, and angry, squeaky voices reached the two Earthmen.

"Some of the Arties are demanding that we be given our lives for escaping the Crystal Cube," Ikkerson told Mulloy. "But I think Khaleman or his henchmen are demanding that we be executed at once."

"Then we've got a chance! Listen, Ike," the words came tumbling out in swift whispers from the redheaded newshawk. "You remember that 'fall' we had? Well, we didn't fall at all—we became smaller! We became infinitesimal, Ike! This entire camp is infinitesimal—microscopic!"

Ikkerson stared uncomprehendingly.

"Yes!" Mulloy went on quickly. "It all fits in now! Why we couldn't find the base at first; why we saw it only after we fell; and why there's a periodic cataclysmic-like vibration here every thirty days! *Ike, Brulgem is a pulsating world!* Vagar's peculiar vibrations are only the outward signs of its tremendous, instantaneous contractions and expansions. That's Khaleman's secret!"

"I don't get it. How does he expect —?"

"Don't you see! Khaleman must have discovered the peculiar nature of Brulgem long ago and planned his invasion accordingly. He must have found out mathematically that Brulgem's last contraction at the perihelion of its orbit would carry it well inside the System defenses! And during that time this base would be altogether invisible! But I came along too soon—before the last contraction began—and saw it!"

SLOW understanding lighted Ikkerson's gaze, but before they could speak further the two Earthmen found themselves in the center of a milling crowd of Arcturians, all talking at once and jabbering violently. Apparently, the question of their fate was still a matter of debate, and not too orderly a one. The Arties on their side seemed to regard it as a matter of principle that they should not die now. Like trying a man twice for the same crime, Mulloy thought.

They were being pushed together with their guards over to a side of the square where the foliage was massed thickly like a great hedge. Mulloy glanced about him swiftly.

"Listen, Ike," he gripped the other's arm, "I'm going to try to slip away. I've got an idea. Whatever happens—you lost sight of me! Right?"

Ikkerson nodded to the whispered query. And a moment later he saw the redheaded newshawk slink sideways and slip unnoticed into a clump of brush near them. The guards were too busy fending off the milling crowd to glimpse their prisoner's swift disappearance.

A moment or two later, the gesticulating Arcturians around the little corporal fell back making a path for someone's approach. Ike saw Khaleman hastening toward him surrounded by armed cohorts. The dwarf's face was livid with angry impatience. At threatening gestures of his armed followers, the unruly crowd fell back still further.

"Where is Mulloy?" Khaleman reached Ikkerson and hissed his question up into the Earthman's face. Ike shook his head with a gesture of innocence.

"I don't know. He—he disappeared."

The dwarf glowered.

"He will be found! Neither of you will escape the punishment due you.

Guards, take this prisoner away."

The crowd was silent now under the domination of the fierce, grotesque little figure. They made way for the squad. Ikkerson grinned to himself: an idea had struck the little corporal of where Mulloy might be headed for. And Ike smiled because it was the last place on Brulgem where the Arties would think to look for the redhead. The guards led him rapidly away.

IKE'S private guess was a good one.

When the queer sunless sky over the camp was brightest, marking Brulgem's midday—Jeff Mulloy was still crouched uncomfortably in a dark corner of the Crystal Cube, shadowed by the great hood that still hung above the gleaming structure. He lay cramped but motionless . . . waiting. For almost three hours he had lain thus and time was getting perilously short. Brulgem's perihelion must be scarcely more than a matter of minutes—

The newshawk's eyes were fastened on the grisly corpse of the reptilian monster near him. If his fantastic theory about Brulgem was true, then this Cube he was in was the only structure in the camp impervious to the rays of contraction. Khaleman had doubtless built it for that purpose, so that he could take astrogation readings even while the base was in its microscopic state. And the idea that had given Mulloy hope was that by remaining in the Cube for a sufficient time, he too would become impervious to the diminishing rays and regain his real size.

Which was why he watched the loathsome, corkscrew corpse. The dead reptile was his semaphore—his barometer, so to speak. Mulloy knew that only by means of the corpse could he be certain of the effect he awaited. And the redheaded newshawk prayed for that effect more earnestly than he ever

asked for anything before.

His eyes, tired and sleepless, flickered and blinked. In that instant, he felt a fleeting quiver run lightning-like the length of his body. With a start he opened his eyes wide and turned to the corpse. *The grisly shape was gone!*

Mulloy jumped up from his cramped position with an exultant cry and dashed for the door pulling on his helmet as he ran. The newshawk knew that when he exited the Arcturian base would no longer lie around the Cube—and it wasn't! Around him was the familiar flat rubbery sand of Brulgem's terrain. He wheeled with only one thought—to get to the transmitter in his cruiser and send out a danger signal that would bring every System ship within ray-range hurtling to the rogue planet.

It brought Mulloy up short to find the amphibian gone. Of course! He felt like kicking himself; the cruiser was contracted still—microscopic! It lay somewhere underfoot lost in the subworld of the Arcturian encampment. In desperation, the redhead stood stock still like a man who sees his last hope dashed before his eyes.

"Well!" an oddly familiar, snarling voice came to his ears. "If it isn't Mr. Jefferson T. Mulloy!"

THE newshawk whirled on his heel and gaped. With a heart that pounded in him like a trip-hammer, Jeff Mulloy recognized behind the bronze, shoulder-tight bulger of the man who had addressed him—none other than Colonel Ivy Hopkins, Commander of the System's Outer Squadron! Around the advancing martinet were the familiar figures of his staff officers including Sergeant Daly. And behind them Mulloy could see the great, grey shapes of the Squadron war-rockets resting easily on Brulgem's sand!

THE PULSATING PLANET

"Colonel Hopkins," Mulloy began in a voice that was choked by emotion, "I've never been so glad to see anyone in—"

"Mulloy!" the Commander snapped. "I simply want to inform you that if it lies in my power you will spend the rest of your life behind bars! Not only do you perpetrate a stupid hoax on my Squadron—but for two days now you have turned it into a searching party! Where in blazes have you been!"

"That's what I want to tell you," Mulloy cried. "I've been in the Arcturian base! Their attack will begin any minute now. They—"

He stopped as Colonel Hopkin's blue eyes began to glitter eerily.

"Would you mind," the Commander began in a low voice that ended almost in a shrill shriek, "—would you mind, Mulloy, telling me where this base is!"

"Yes," the redhead said quickly. "It's there." He pointed underfoot. "Microscopic. I can't explain now. But you must believe me. The Arcturians are being led by Kha LeMin—the renegade Earthman—"

"Mulloy!" Colonel Hopkin's voice was an apoplectic gasp. "That's enough. Do you hear? I've had enough!" He gestured in speechless rage to several of his under-officers. "Take him away! Lock him up where I can't see him. I'm liable to—"

The Squadron martinet did not end his almost undignified outburst; but instead whirled and made for his flagship like a man pursued by furies. Mulloy cried out after him, struggling in the grip of the Patrol officers, but the Commander did not turn. In renewed desperation, the newshawk found himself being carried almost bodily toward the forward lock of the flagship.

"Listen!" he cried as the lock was opened and his guards prepared to throw him into the dark hold. "Listen,

all of you! You must believe—"

Then, like magic, incredibly, swiftly and before the eyes of all—it happened. A fleeting, instantaneous quake seemed to shock the terrain of Brulgem; and the startled officers and men of the System's Outer Squadron found themselves gazing on an apparition. Under their eyes, scarcely a hundred yards away, a great land encampment had materialized around the glass house on the sand!

"*There it is!*" Mulloy yelled squirming away from the limp grasp of the wonder-stricken officers. "Quick, Colonel Hopkins! Blast those ships before they can get off! Don't wait until they turn the fortress guns on us!"

COLONEL HOPKINS' face was a pasty green; but he was the kind of man who could acknowledge defeat. He could also meet a new situation with astonishing speed. Mulloy's words had scarcely left the newshawk's lips, when the men of the Outer Squadron were jumping to life under the crackling whip-like commands of their Commander. With swift precision, but without haste, the men of the Patrol streamed along the gangways and runways of their ships and in twenty-five seconds every one was at his post. All were ready for the first salvo.

"Demand immediate surrender," Colonel Hopkins barked to his radioman. Mulloy, who had followed the martinet into the controlroom of the flagship, could see clearly into the Arcturian camp. The Arties were hardly yet recovered from the shock of seeing the great Squadron ships appear virtually over their heads. But some already were running toward the barracks-fortress and into the destroyers.

Mulloy saw a tiny figure in a glittering uniform run out into the great square of the camp. Khaleman! The

dwarf was issuing commands to the slow-moving White-hairs. Under his desperate, venomous cries, the Arcturians hurried toward their posts. But it was too late; and the newshawk felt that the dwarf knew he was beaten.

"No answer, sir," the radioman said. Hopkins turned to the speaking-tube. "All starboard guns," he announced rapidly. "Aim over the camp. Fire when ready."

The flagship shook as a dozen bursts of green fumes from the nitrate-explosives burst a bare fifty yards behind the camp. The shots seemed to infuriate the grotesque little figure in the square. The dwarf swung his hands in a frenzy of epithets and commands to his subordinates. But at that moment Mulloy saw a group of Arties suddenly break into the square and make toward Khaleman.

The redhead's eyes widened in joy as he saw the great figure at the head of the insurgent group: Vagar! There could be no mistaking the purpose of the grim, black-eyed Artie and his followers. Like an avalanche, they swept down on the man who had almost brought their race to ruin. Khaleman and the few henchmen around him were engulfed and swept back by the fierce charge. The rest of the camp did not run to the dwarf's assistance. In the crisis, they appeared to trust more in Vagar, their own countryman.

"The Arcturians agree to surrender, sir," the radioman said a moment later.

"Hold fire," Hopkins ordered into the speaking tube. And to the radioman: "Have them dismount all guns and disarm all soldiers. Have their leaders come out; and tell them we're sending in an occupation corps."

With that, the martinet turned. There was on Colonel Hopkins' ascetic countenance what might almost be described as a grin of admiration. The

Commander was actually about to slap Jeff Mulloy heartily on the back and congratulate him, but he stayed his upraised hand.

The redhead had slumped back in his seat. He was out cold! But there was a smile on his tired face.

Hopkins grinned again and signalled an orderly to carry the newshawk to the flagship's best cabin.

"**T**HEN the peculiar magnetism," Vagar said thoughtfully, "was actually nothing but the Brownian phenomena of tiny particles in a fluid!"

"Yes," Jeff Mulloy said, "and the fluid was air. The minute degree of air in Brulgem's atmosphere was more than enough for us in the contracted state."

The newshawk had just finished explaining to Vagar how he had arrived at Khaleman's secret. The two and Corporal Ikkerson were closeted together in Hopkins' private office, awaiting the arrival of the Colonel and Elin. The flagship held a gala appearance, for tonight's party was a bon-voyage celebration in honor of Vagar. The black-eyed Arcturian was returning home in a few hours bearing with him peace terms wired from Earth.

"But what I still don't understand," Ike put in, "is where Khaleman found that monster that attacked us in the Crystal Cube!"

Mulloy grinned.

"That 'monster,' Ike," he said, "was nothing but a microbe! A spirochete! Probably Khaleman thought it was an ingenious and impressive way to kill off his enemies. The germ retained its

original size in the Cube. The ink I accidentally used stained it and killed it, the same way you stain a bacteria on a slide. It was one of the things that put me on the right track."

The door opened and Colonel Hopkins marched into the office, escorting a lovely, blue eyed girl who was apparently none the worse for the harrowing experience she had passed through earlier that day. Elin, Jeff Mulloy decided judiciously, was even more beautiful in a tulle gown than she had been in the tunic—if that was possible. She sat next to him, and under the table around which every one was seated he held her hand.

"How was I to know," Mulloy whispered, "that Vagar was your half-brother? I thought you were in love with him!"

"I am," Elin laughed with a fond glance at the big Arcturian across the table, "—in a sisterly way! He was father's son on Arcturus. You can see a resemblance in the eyes."

Her clear brow darkened as she mentioned her father. Kha LeMin was in irons underdeck; but Elin knew that he would receive a fair trial for his great crimes from the System Court. It was only this day that the girl had learned the enormity of those crimes. It was just that Kha LeMin should pay for them.

Hopkins rose, glass in hand, and toasted the young couple.

"Well, Mulloy," the old martinet said, "I predicted that you'd go back to Earth under guard. But I'm blasted if it won't be a guard of honor!"

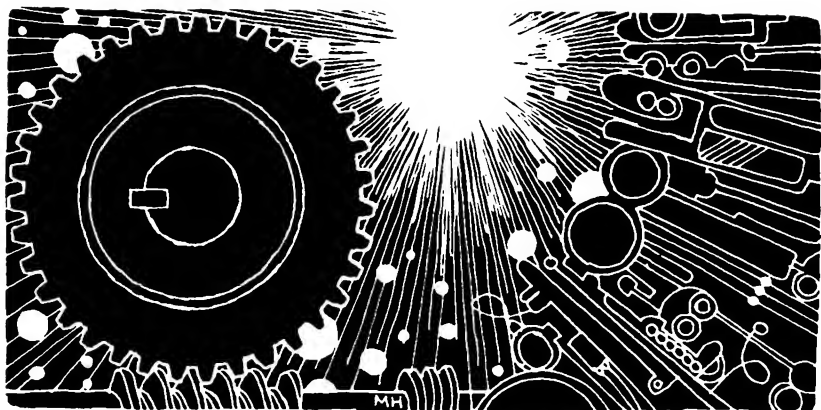
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 113)

books, or if they should commission others. Still, the possibilities (if they were to select writers of the stature of Phil Dick and Frank Herbert) are exciting to contemplate. A series like this, with each writer trying to build from and out-do the other, might produce some interesting

results.

All in all, there has been little in the genre of the stature of McGoohan's show and Disch's book. It is the rare work of this caliber which makes science fiction worthwhile.

—Hank Stine



FANTASY FANDOM

With this issue, this department moves in a new direction. It becomes a forum for you, the reader, to speak out. Fantasy Fandom originally reprinted pertinent essays from the fanzines. And it may do so again occasionally, but its main thrust now is to provide you, the readers and fans, with a public soapbox from which you can address us. The topics will remain as before: science fiction and its community. The difference is that of audience participation.

The essay by Jeffrey Clark which follows was responsible in large measure for this shift in policy. Written to our sister magazine, AMAZING STORIES, it was in itself as long as an average letter column and obviously unsuitable by reason of length for publication there. I doubt if Mr. Clark actually expected it to be printed (and it should certainly surprise him when he finds it here), but it so exactly satisfied our requirements for this column—despite the fact that it was not first published in a fanzine—that our

entire policy required rethinking. And once that occurred, it became obvious to me that since no other magazine offers space to its readers for “guest editorials” or essays, there was a genuine need for such a department. Therefore, a low bow to Jeffrey Clark for kicking our new policy off to its start—with the essay below.
—TW

Dear Mr. White,

I am glad to see your editorials appearing in AMAZING and FANTASTIC—they are really quite exceptional. In fact, the one in the September AMAZING has prompted me to write this piece. It is the first one I've written for a science fiction magazine (despite being a decade-long reader); consequently, it's going to be considerably more than just a letter. Here goes:

First, I'd like to intrude my own thoughts on the New Wave vs. the traditionalists/Old Wave/what-have-you

"battle" that you refer to in your editorial. I attended the 1969 Lunacon you mention, and had a front-row seat when, toward the end of the last day's program, a vigorous argument between a panel of writers and John J. Pierce (representing many of similar opinion) evolved from the discussion. It was all quite illuminating.

I am tempted to agree that the alarm of the "reactionaries" smacks of paranoia. The very terms New Wave and, especially, New "Thing", exemplify this feeling of an ambiguous, devouring encroachment. New Wave (hate that term) is merely a different style (or styles), another way of writing. It seems that, in a way, s.f. can be seen, in essence, as "change" itself: to a great extent it deals with the change in man and his universe, and all the possibilities of *everything*. In the establishment camp, s.f. seems to deal with change but is unwilling to change itself, as a form.

The conflict increases when some particularly belligerent New Wavists dismiss whole types or categories of s.f., or anything written prior to—blank-blank. This sometimes amuses me: revolutionary movements always go to excesses, whether they mean them or not. The point seems to be: through revolution we'll shape an evolution of the s.f. form. Survival of the (literary/artistic) fittest will cause the old, the inept, to be sloughed off like dead weight.

This is where things go wrong. What we should do is not trade an old type of perception for a new one, but add to the range and number of our perceptive capabilities. Simply: there is room for everyone, every kind of writing. I don't think one will throw over the other.

This brings me to the temper of the discussion of that last panel of writers just

prior to the argument; also, to your editorial—the feeling of confinement writers can suffer. Point one: many writers seem ambivalent about fandom—it may satisfy the ego in certain capacities, but it is also a sort of unprofessional stigma (peers outside the field observe casually and perhaps snicker—how silly!). Point two: in keeping with the traditionalists, to an extent the Second Foundation people (I don't know enough details about them), fandom has a tendency, through feedback, lengthiness of status quo, and whatever, to attach itself fondly to certain general areas of writing and stories. This can be reasonable; but it is detrimental when it erects strictures around the form.

That panel of writers was, once under way, having a rather serious discussion of the field concerning artistic aims and matters in general. The last point being: the readers (fandom) have got to get out of the habit of demanding (figuratively) a certain type of writing or story from the writers and, instead, accept what these same writers want to do, and create, when it's good. Ideally, the writer is foremost a literary artist, trying to write what he wants and how he wants. The reading public should want to read what they want to write (especially in our field), without threats ("write like *this* and you'll get *that* award"). Writers are human: they can be induced into thinking, due to adulation, that they're doing what they want to do, or what they're doing is good. (I realize many don't care anyhow; but that's another story.)

The other thing I learned from that end-of-convention debate is that Mr. Pierce's position requires of s.f. that it maintain a certain outlook and attitude toward life in general. This could not be

more wrong for, and detrimental to, our field. S.f. writers owe no allegiance to any specific outlook; they need only be true to themselves and what they can observe physically and metaphorically. Each personality is different; the sum total of perception in individual writing can have limitless diversity. A uniform outlook, no matter how general, is more than itself a limitation: it also straitjackets types of perceptions and writing to express them.

Onward: to literary criticism and the no-plot radicals. New Wavers should not be condemned out of hand for negligible plotting—that's not necessarily a lack of body. One must honestly decide, despite sneaking suspicions that the writer don't know nothin' about constructing plot and character, whether the "story" is good in itself. Because a story has no plot doesn't make it "bad."

Since what experimentalists write about may be somewhat "different," the way they choose to write it may be different. And I might say that character can sometimes be dispensed with, and the literary result still be satisfying. Character is important to the traditional story form; but there are possibly types of writing where—because the "story" utilizes no characters to speak of, or perhaps mere parodies in some experimental construction—the personality of the writer (character, if you will) is the factor that lends the piece its life and interest.

Plot is a sticky thing, actually. According to generally-held literary standards, plot is one of the least important elements of literary merit. But this is only plot itself—otherwise many a cherished author, whose claim to fame is "he spins a fancy yarn," would be consigned to the hack-heap.

There has to be something more

integrated with the plot; some feeling of an individual vision or creation must arise from the story as a whole (I don't mean anything grandiose or necessarily lofty by that).

Story-telling can be an art form, of course. But, as in all literature, since you're working with words, "selection" is important. It's not just "telling a good story" (good in the usual "it's fun" sense), but selecting carefully what's going to happen, how you're going to tell what's happening (what to put in, leave out), when it's going to happen, what sentences to relate the event, what words to use to make up the sentences (the quality of description you want), rhythm and pacing, etc. It's ridiculous to tell a writer this, but a lot of readers don't actually realize what the writing process involves. And that's just for a plotted story, not even touching on what those negative/no-plot writers do. Due to general cultural orientation (traditional-type literature), it may be easier to pull a snow-job in the "New Wave", but most of these writers do honestly have to work with words to get what they're trying for. Mostly, they just employ words and structure differently.

It may be evident by now that I like, and hope I can appreciate, various styles of writing, new and old. I'd be the first to admit that I don't always know what's good—not nearly often enough (what we like isn't always good, and vice versa—but it helps). In s.f., as in other fields of art and literature, I follow a relatively open attitude in trying to evaluate things. I don't think s.f. in particular, and literature in general, is striving, evolving toward some key form to express the essence of life or any-such. (Virtually every thing and form can look ridiculous in this light with the passage of

sufficient time.) Instead, I try to follow the idea that (here, in s.f.) there is a particular "goodness" in every "kind" of thing (writing, or story), when it's done well. Thus, you can get a particular "satisfaction" from an *ANALOG* story, another from the wide field of *AMAZING*, and another still from writing to be found in, say, *NEW WORLDS*. (I don't mean to imply that these or other publications print one "type" of story—though *ANALOG* almost does.)

Admittedly, some stories are more limited in their artistry than others. But this area is safest when the stories dealt with have self-imposed strictures on their form, or the writers just aren't good enough. Generally, when I read something that I feel is big and beautiful and important because I respond to it so deeply, I hate to use that literary fine-grain labelling like "major" and "minor" masterpieces and works, based on "nobility" and "significance" of theme (sic), etc.

There's a lot I don't hold with concerning "mainstream" literature, criticism, attitudes, in relation to s.f. Some of it is evident already. One thing, avoided till now, is indirectly prompted by your editorial. I don't know whether you use the word "genre" for s.f. as a matter of form or because that's the way you feel. Personally, once we get past an *ANALOG*-type definition of s.f., into the realm of speculative fiction/fabulation, opening the horizons (not simply to accommodate the new stuff that's been written, but because that's where they've always been but we haven't seen them clearly until now), I tend to lean toward the open attitudes Judith Merrill has (or had' she seems to keep changing every year). That is: s.f. is a field in its own

right, potentially larger than mainstream literature. S.f. ranges over all permutations of all possibilities that ever were, are or could be. Mainstream only deals with that limited set of possibilities that have passed from probability into fact.

This is a pretty small area through which to manipulate human beings. For writers who are really trying to be original or individual in mainstream, it is getting quite difficult. They must experiment, embark upon event-sequence, time-space manipulation, etc. This causes many of them to invade the borders of s.f. territory (perish the thought! that stuff!). Curiously, the only literature that can be taken seriously is that which is a part of the "real world" (contemporary is better).

The mention of "literature" reminds me of "novel", which brings up an interesting subject. To the best of my knowledge, in all of the discussions of writing categories, mainly for award purposes, that I've read in the magazines, it appears that "novel," "novella", "novelette", "short story" are based upon number of words or pages rather than characteristics of each type. I used to think that this was slightly simple-minded, but I will concede that few literary sources I've read seem to agree completely on each of these. Upon thinking it over: perhaps the distinction by wordage is wise, whether unconscious or whatever. Since there are so many "types" of writing in fiction occurring today, it may be better to keep them as labels, more or less. In any event, things tend to keep themselves in fairly decent order, since certain general literary qualities are agreed upon. The substance of a short story stretched to novel-length usually shows itself in a bad light and, whether or not it has clear-cut qualities as

a novel is supposed to have, the thing appears unsatisfactory.

"Novel" itself is a handy term, most likely, for an extended-length work of literature. In s.f., the correct term, more often, might be "fabulation", as Dr. Robert Scholes has pointed out (*The Fabulators*) in examples like "Giles Goat-Boy" and "Cat's Cradle".

At any rate, in any review by a mainstream critic, I've almost never seen the reviewer refer to a work of s.f. as a novel, no matter how long it is. "Novel" seems to be a term of prestige in this sense. The alternative might be "tale" or "yarn", or some-such less distinguished expression.

Anyhow, to make things easy, concerning the s.f. "novel": I was going to say something almost exactly the same as what Norman Spinrad wrote in his review of "Stand On Zanzibar"—the genuine s.f. novel (in the traditional sense) is, ideally, a higher form of art than the mainstream novel. True. The mainstream writer sets up his environment by selecting desired details from the real world. The s.f. writer must first invent his environment mentally (even if it's an extrapolation on the current one), then decide what details about it to include, for his purposes, as he writes his book. The task is obviously more difficult.

Now I am at a possibly touchy area: comparisons between s.f. and mainstream literary giants. (If I get a bit vindictive here, it's because I'm tired and irritated at all the literary garbage spewed in our direction from the other side, chastising us unknowledgeably.) We leap for joy and toss kudos and praise at several of our writers, usually young and bold, and then ... when we touch upon comparisons, specific or general, to historical or contemporary giants, we get

wary and abase ourselves in what (I feel) is an odd manner (*great*, but he's not yet up to the level of ----). Take note that what I say now is largely in the theoretical, or idealistic, vein—I don't claim any incredible feats or achievements for s.f. in general. And, of course, I am speaking of s.f. in the broad, open sense that I referred to previously.

We should watch out that we don't work at cross-purposes when comparing s.f. to "great" mainstream writing. First of all, it's a long-held, if not universal, opinion that s.f. shouldn't be judged by normal literary standards (how and to what extent is another thing altogether). I used to think so, too, and after many thoughts and years, still do, but in a qualitatively different way (more in the consideration of artistic aims). Now we come to this question of "depth"—of the novel, of the vision in it, etc.

Let's be realistic—look at cultural underpinnings. What is considered depth in the mainstream novel is, much of it, the sociological/psychological/economic/etc. ramifications of the culture and environment the work is set in (these are the under/overtone and sub-themes, etc., weaving through the main theme). If the writer has the least pretensions of seriousness, these things are read in and explored therefrom—whether he didn't mean most of them, did, or just threw in a few key "priming" references in hopes that something would connect. By dealing with "reality" and important contemporary problems and themes, and having an integrated, comprehending vision of some part of man and society/world, the writer has done something "significant, important".

This is a large part of depth and greatness. So far, so good, when talking about mainstream writing as an isolated

subject. But now relate this to s.f., which more often than not is not grounded in a contemporary environment (not even a near-future extrapolation). Possibly this is part of s.f.'s very nature in its most far-ranging forms.

Now—at this point an entire area for consideration of the “depth” of the work is eliminated or drastically altered. The reaction of mainstream critics in has been to (1) dismiss the whole field out of hand (as a decent literary form, or as an irrevocably lesser one), or (2) ignore it as completely as possible (time, however, may rectify this last one and give s.f. a more just, clear-headed analysis; perhaps it can only be judged fully at a later date). A novel like Brunner's *Stand On Zanzibar* might contain much of this “depth” because it is a near-future extrapolation and, from what I've read about it (I haven't read it yet), appears to be very thorough and elaborate.

Possibly. But what about the incredible range of s.f. that doesn't aspire to this? I think we come here to “culture outlook” and diverging pathways. S.f. is largely a “cerebral” literature in the sense that it is a “creation of the mind”. It's very substance is most often cerebral beyond the mere thinking (and talent) required to combine and weave themes, excellence of writing and clarity of the whole, etc. (A somewhat separate point: in our form things and actual events can be important for themselves—not just representations of the deeper meanings or a configuration of the story's metaphysical/philosophical lay-out. This is one thing about “2001: A Space Odyssey” that many critics either missed or ignored (how could they?)—that what occurs in the film happens on a literal as well as symbolic level; the film is richer for this, as is much of s.f. Accepting

things as concrete in a (s.f.) novel's own relatively “surreal reality” adds resonance (and then some, if the writer is exceptional).

S.f. diverges from mainstream on the point of culture, on the very subject matter it chooses or can choose. As I mentioned earlier, this whole range of contemporary environment and cultural details, the secular culture (used as background), is jettisoned by s.f. in the sense the mainstream employs it. (Here is a conflict, because this particular mainstream way of using human culture is generally assumed to be, in half-baked thought, necessary for the foundations of art(?).)

S.f. ignores the local culture of contemporary reality/time/space, quite often, and extrapolates from a broader “overview” of culture (that's putting it a little simply, of course). We begin to get writers like Roger Zelazny and Samuel R. Delany with “trans-cultural” grasps (I think that's a Judith Merrill phrase). (I'm going to name a few writers; they aren't the only ones I could use, just ones I'm most familiar with and possibly better examples, too.)

Kubrick and Clarke, in “2001”, offer us a similar thing: an overview of humanity and something more—and not just an intellectual one, but a visceral, deeply emotional one. It isn't laden in details of near-future life and it isn't simply a scathing commentary/analysis of man and his machine culture—and that's what thoroughly bugged (or misled) some prominent literary (mainstream) film critics (plus the fact that the film is exceptional cinema).

“2001” has no real human characters to speak of, not much of a plot, but it is still a great work of art. The important thing is that the spirit of the artist who created

the film shines through. It is, in a way, an odyssey of the spirit of man in search of a kindred spirit and, ultimately, himself. The film closely approaches the cosmic, the true "universal", in a much more literal sense than when that term is applied to great literary works "of culture and breeding".

It is similar with s.f. as literature in what it can be, if not quite in what it is and has been. (In the course of what I'm saying, in no way to I mean to imply that these things are what s.f. should be, but only lesser-recognized areas of what it can be in relation to literature in general.) There is a qualitative difference between s.f. and mainstream. As with the film, works of writing that head for similar directions conceivably have a truly good chance of being "enduring" in the long run. They do not depend on the precise location in a real time cultural matrix and the attendant detail of environmental processes. They work more directly from the mind (and the heart of the spirit). S.f. can be a more "pure" form for the outsider happening upon it for the first time without relevant knowledge.

This is the point at which the critical carping evidences itself. Great literary works are almost never judged exclusively on their own, but with accompanying research into the author's life, whereupon parallels and insights among life and work and "times" are accumulated and the richness of the thing just grows and grows...

Not so in s.f. It's not just that nobody cares about researching even our best-known authors (they're not really "important" writers). There are other things involved—concerning the form itself and some of the best stuff that's been produced and is now coming from dynamic young writers.

Picture this: *How* do you tell, from his writing, that Delany sprang from a childhood in Harlem? *How* do you see that Zelazny is a middle-class American who worked for the civil service? *How* do you draw direct parallels between life and work? (The same with several other writers.) Life experience shows up strangely transmuted, tempered by knowledge of (and talent for) writing.

And finally, *how* do you tell, from "2001", that Stanley Kubrick is a mid-Twentieth Century American from the Bronx (other than the film's indication of the advent of space travel—and the title)?

You don't, not in any way that counts.

But you don't call them infantile or "lacking humanity" (I'm thinking of cracks about Kubrick now) either. Critical salvos of this variety have been leveled because Kubrick's work contains nothing of his concrete life-roots, of his "time", in it—he can't be labelled and pigeonholed. (Rather, he is working with his thoughts and feelings on a very aware, abstract level.) What escapes these critics is the fact that the film has humanity enough because it was made by a genuine human being, created through his sensory capacities. Because anything created by man's mind, from real experience to fantastic imaginings in the search for truth, must be interpreted through mental imagery conceived in human limitations—within self and environment.

That poster/slogan: "Reality is a crutch"—how true. You've got the materials of what life is (for us) to work with—how are you going to use them? Create writing art? You can opt for "realism" and "worldliness" or bend, distort, rearrange, illuminate obliquely and go for something else.

I watched the touch-down and first steps on the moon—and heard and viewed the opinions, thoughts, and reactions of people (newsmen, citizens), what it all meant to them. To a large extent, they were amazingly vulgar—at least in what they said. (But it has really been done, so science fiction can't be all bad.) And Archibald MacLeish composed a "moon poem" for the *N.Y. Times*. It was never worth a major poet's time before the Reality (*obviously*).

People aren't so subtle. They have to be hit over the head with reality before something dawns on them with meaning—a little. CBS-TV interviewed Robert Heinlein and he put the lie to the whole thing by telling the commentator that it was the greatest event in human history—and the man still didn't quite seem to understand.

People seem to avoid thinking in these terms. They compare it to Columbus and stuff like that. They need to "identify".

What we need is not identity but a more creative, responsive "empathy". And that brings me back to the Lunacon. Marion Zimmer Bradley said a beautiful

thing. The mainstream writer says, in effect, nothing that is human is alien to me. The s.f. writer should be able to say, nothing that has "being" is alien to me. And that, to coin a cliché, is "where it's at". Quite often, the farther "outward" you go, the farther inward you must reach.

As I said before, I make no grandiose claims for s.f. having done the things I've discussed. But maybe it has occasionally, and surely it will; I think we've got a few writers that can (and have) go far in these directions. (We've certainly got some great or approaching-great stylists whose work strikes true chords—Zelazny, Delany, other "youngsters"; "oldsters": Leiber, Sturgeon, Bradbury.)

Samuel R. Delany said he believes in s.f. as the best way to combine the "disparate and the technical with the desperate and the human". I think our literature can fulfill that statement and then some. S.f. can point out that, in essence, the human condition is merely being human.

—Jeffrey Clark

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77)

dancing among the assembled people, a stranger in a black cloak stood with a benign smile under the shelter of a sycamore.

"Was it not clever, Horimos?" he said under his breath to the prisoned elemental beneath the water. "Was it not ingenious to pervert the thinking of rational man into the random path of a gambler, who lacks even the dangerous knowledge of an enchanter when he tampers with the forces of chaos?"

Unnoticed except by the traveller, the pond gave off a bubble full of foul marshy gas, which might have been intended for

an answer.

"Shut—brr-up!"

"By all means, Horimos," murmured the traveller, and drained the mug of Brewer Harring's good beer which he, like all passers-by on a festival day, had been offered. He set the vessel on a handy stump, and the music rose to a frantic, gay crescendo.

When, a little diffidently, the new bride came to greet him and make him welcome among the other company, there was no trace of his presence except the empty mug.

—John Brunner



...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication here should be addressed to According to You, c/o P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232.

Dear Ted,

I give you a vote of confidence on the magazines. Each and every editor, of course, works differently, and naturally each one, in so far as the publisher (the man paying the money) will let him, shapes a magazine in the light of his own likes and dislikes. It's only normal. According to your own lights as to author and story preferences, and in your own way, I think you are doing a good job as editor.

However, to praise or dispraise you as an editor is not what I started out to do. I am concerned about the "Coming in the February *FANTASTIC*" announcement as it relates to my story, "Learning It at Miss Rejoyy's." The authorship of the story is credited to David Bloch. Please let me hear that this is just an error in printing in the current *FANTASTIC* and that my story will be properly credited to David R. Bunch when it appears. I am proud of the story, and I assure you that I

don't want "David Bloch" or any other person, real or synthetic, to take credit for it.

David R. Bunch
St. Louis, Missouri

Every so often we make an enormous goof, David, and I'm sorry that on this occasion you were the victim. Originally we noticed that Robert Bloch's name was misspelled—as "Blocy"—and in attempting to have it corrected, we ended up with his name still misspelled, and the credit for your story scrambled in the bargain. As you now know, your name was correctly given in our February issue. Probably because our "next issue" blurbs are the last items to be set each issue, they seem more likely to be plagued by typos of this sort than anything else.
—TW

Dear Mr. Malzberg:

In his editorial in the February, 1969, issue of *FANTASTIC*, Robert Silverberg explains how science fiction has evolved from a juvenile to a mature basis. In this very same editorial, Mr. Silverberg refers to "teenagers newly graduated from

comic books," completely ignoring the fact that today's comic books, too, are emerging from their old juvenile status.

With such prejudice as this, is it any wonder that science fiction is still not entirely respectable?

Richard Morrissey
55 Claudette Circle
Framingham, Mass., 01701

Your letter only recently surfaced in our files, Richard; but even though it's a year late in publication, I think it raises a valid point. Let me say out front that I have enjoyed a long association with the comics field—ranging from fan publications in the early 1950's, to authorship of the "Captain America" novel, 'The Great Gold Steal. I count many of the professionals in the comics field as personal friends. But I doubt that any of them would make a serious claim to an adult status for today's commercial comics. Many would like to see the emergence of genuinely adult applications of the comic (or "graphic art") form. Gil Kane, with his HIS NAME IS SAVAGE (which lasted a single issue) and a forthcoming project for a book publisher, has probably pursued this goal as realistically and vigorously as anyone. And of course Wallace Wood started his quasi-fanzine, WITZEND, with the goal of publishing the "adult" works of comics artists.

The sad fact is that although comics are presently read by more teenagers and adults than pre-teen children, they are still edited, published, and censored for the young child, on the principle of The Lowest Common Denominator. As such, they are limited, and their limitations seem inescapable.

The alternatives are the emerging "Underground Comix" and the use of the "graphic art" technique in areas outside

the comics themselves. The latter is most encouraging—and you may be seeing manifestations of it here in our pages soon. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I couldn't resist saying hello. We met face-to-face last year at the Philadelphia Writers' Conference, where I took, and derived much benefit from, your course in the mystery novel technique. (I was the small gray-haired lady on the front row with plenty of questions.)

By chance, yesterday, I bought the October FANTASTIC, and there I meet you again as editor and contributor. Naturally, I dived right into your editorial, and then your fine story, "It Could Be Anywhere."

Let me assure you, from the first word to the last period, I couldn't put your story down until I found out what happened to Ronald Archer and Robin Foster. They came through as real people and more—the sort a reader could sympathize with. And their environment was so real I could taste the subway grit on my lips and feel the rumbling under my feet. All the more wallop, then, when the "passengers" literally fall apart!

I saw a deeper meaning in this story. To me, Robin's predicament in the real New York was more frightening than in the city of fantasy—cut off from her natural place in the world which contained family and friends or at least people who knew her. For this she had exchanged an existence in an anonymous multitude, all scrambling over each other for survival, with neither morals nor mercy to spare. Add Ronald Archer's disgust with things as they are and they lay the train for their own disaster. As so often happens in real life. It is never enough to escape from something. One must always run to something.

Harriet Fleischmann
127 W. Queen Lane
Philadelphia, Pa., 19144

Dear Sir:

"It Could Be Anywhere" . . . I thought editors were supposed to be *frustrated* writers. Mind, I'm not complaining. The story was okay, if you like that sort of thing. It just doesn't seem fair, somehow . . .

John F. Pilznienski
5967 Waverly

Dearborn Heights, Mich., 48127

Well, John, you see nobody ever told me I was going to be the editor of this magazine when I set out to be a writer, ten years ago. And with twelve books and a number of short stories under my belt, I don't feel particularly "frustrated." Some of the best editors in our field—John Campbell, H.L. Gold, Fred Pohl, Sam Merwin, to name a few—have been writers first (and when editing interfered with their writing or forced them to stop, we all felt the loss). In my case, I continue to moonlight as a writer, and my stories will continue to crop up from time to time here, as well as elsewhere. In the meantime, I donate my editorials, book reviews, and replies to letters such as yours gratis, as part of my job. That's the breaks . . . —TW

Dear Mr. White,

You have indeed added considerably to the merits of FANTASTIC in the past year. I am glad the price has been raised so you have been enabled to present more new fiction. I have particularly enjoyed the first installment of "Hasan" and Mr. Anthony's accompanying article.

In your editorial, you remarked that you did not cut any of your serial fiction.

In the Ballantine edition of Robert Silverberg's "Up The Line" there were several passages, in Elliott's assignation with Empress Theodora for example, that I do not recall. Were they inserted especially for the book, perchance?

As to your artwork . . . Are Bruce Jones and Jeff Jones related? Their styles, particularly with women, seem similar.

M. Lyons
341 Laird St.
Oakhurst, N.J., 07755

Robert Silverberg did some editing on his manuscript before giving it to us for publication in AMAZING STORIES. For the most part, this was confined to the more explicitly sexual passages. I made no further cuts, nor would I necessarily have made the cuts he did. However, I honestly feel that our version was the better one—the novel's strengths were not in the lines Bob cut. As for Bruce and Jeff Jones—no, they are not related, and in fact I don't believe they've met. Perhaps they share common influences or aspirations. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

Not too long ago I thought that FANTASTIC was finished. The new stories were insignificant in both length and quality, and only once in a very long while would there be a good reprint.

Several editors—good editors—tried to revive, or at least keep the magazine alive, but it was evident that only a master surgeon could save FANTASTIC.

And he came! The operation was successful and the patient seems to be on the road to health again. Congratulations, Dr. White!

About the October issue: To my surprise, I found myself liking *all* the new

stories, particularly "A Guide to the City"—which made me think of Jorge Luis Borges—and your own effort, "It Could Be Anywhere." "Man Swings SF" and "Ten Percent of Glory" were funny and made good reading.

The features in FANTASTIC are excellent. Your editorials are interesting and thought-provoking; *Fantasy Fandom* is perhaps even more praiseworthy; the review column can't go wrong when handled by Fritz Leiber.

Yes, FANTASTIC is a magazine well worth reading, though it is no Hugo contender—yet. I wish you luck.

Torbjorn Karlsson

Odengatan 59

S-113 22 Stockholm, Sweden

Gentlemen:

I have been a fan of your magazine for a number of years. The last few issues have shown you showing a lack of imagination as to the material presented. I don't like to read of the present, but of a future that might happen. The present is too finite to be changed radically as in "It Could Be Anywhere," which would stretch a person's imagination to the breaking point.

"A Seabee in South Vietnam"

R. L. Bates

F.P.O., San Francisco, 96601

I wish I had the imagination to decipher your complaint. —TW

Dear Sir:

I can hardly wait for the February issue of FANTASTIC and the conclusion of Piers Anthony's "Hasan." This story, as you commented, is indeed an adult fairy-tale. In a way I'm almost glad it was offered in two parts. Perhaps this aroused my masochistic streak, but it's rather like

weekly chapters of "The Lone Ranger," when I was very young. Mr. Anthony is a masterful writer, though he has an inclination to prolix, and I look forward to seeing more of his work in FANTASTIC. I have, pompously, one criticism of your magazine. I bought my December copy in mid-September. This seems to be overdoing the post-dating bit.

William J. Harty

P.O. Box 364

Haverhill, Mass., 01830

Originally the cover date specified the off-sale date. However, as various publishers tried to gain a month on sale by advancing their dates, the cover dates on most magazines have lost their original meaning without acquiring any others. These days they are handy simply as reference points. And if you think the cover date confuses you, how about this: It is presently mid-October as I type this, but the issue this will be appearing in will be dated April, and coming out in late January. Keeping these dates straight has added at least one new prematurely grey hair to my head for each issue I've prepared . . . ! —TW

Dear Ted,

Having read the December issue of FANTASTIC a couple of thoughts come to mind. Although I enjoyed the story, "Hasan," by Piers Anthony, and I am certain that Piers' article was informative to some, I can't help believe that enough is too much. One of the reasons I buy the magazines in addition to the books is hoped-for diversification. You have, for my taste in magazines, devoted too much space to this one subject. That sort of thing is a practice of one of your competitors. I do hope it won't become one of yours.

Ted, I am, like other science-fiction readers, thankful for the changes you have made in both AMAZING and FANTASTIC, but please let's now sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labors and stop the interminable discussion about it.

One last gripe. Maybe I'm ignorant, but I don't understand why the other magazines are able to commission art by American artists and have no reprints at all, while you find it necessary.

Larry Nichols
450 Melrose
Chicago, Illinois, 60657

Well, Larry, if you ever buy the book version of "Hasan" (assuming one is published), you probably won't find Piers' backgrounding article included. That's one item of diversification for you. As for the "interminable discussion" about the changes I've made in FANTASTIC, I can only print the letters I receive. I agree with you that it's time to move on to fresher topics; now, if you'll just organize a fresh discussion in your next letter, the ice will be broken. Finally, every magazine gropes in its own way towards economic viability, some with greater success than others. If we were selling twice as many copies of FANTASTIC, we would be able to spend a good deal more money on it. Nonetheless, even with our present Classic Reprint, we are giving you more total wordage of new material than most of our competitors. Check out the relative type-size and number of pages. —TW

Dear Mr. White,

The December issue of FANTASTIC was quite good. "Hasan" by Piers Anthony was only fair. It fell far short of his excellent novel *Omnivore*. "Magic Show" by Alan E. Nourse was the best

story of this issue. I have always been a fan of Nourse, and I hope you have more stories by him in the future.

When I started getting FANTASTIC 4½ years ago, it was mainly for the reprints. I think that the improvement you have made to the magazine more than makes up for the almost elimination of them.

You haven't had a story by David R. Bunch since your April issue. I hope that you'll have some more stories by him in the near future.

One more thing I would like to see in FANTASTIC is part of a novel in every issue. I mean by that serialise a novel.

J. Collinson
9707, 79th Ave.
Edmonton 63, Alberta, Canada

By now you've read David Bunch's "Learning It At Miss Rejoyy's" in our last issue; I have on hand for an upcoming issue his "In The Land of the Not-Unhappies", and I think you can count on his appearing here on a fairly regular basis. Normally we would be running part of a serialised novel in every issue including this one, but when Fritz Leiber comes along with a brand new 30,000 word Fafhrd novella, what is one to do? Obviously, exactly what we did do: it's here complete, and we'll pick up with a serial again next issue. —TW

That wraps things up for this issue. Remember that with our new Reader Feedback, even if your letter is not published here, your comments on the stories we've published will be forwarded directly to their respective authors; your praises and brickbats alike will be read by every author concerned. So keep writing. Now, more than ever, you can be sure your voice will be heard. —Ted White



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AMAZING Stories, June 1929 through September 1939 for sale, excellent condition. Miscellaneous others. R. Gentsch, 44 Holly St., Staten Island, N.Y. 10304.

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